ABSTRACT

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the reasons why some African-American dancers, choreographers, and educators choreograph, how they choreograph, and what they choreograph about. This study investigated how the dance experience provides meaning for these individuals and their perceptions of the meaning of Black dance. Although we know dance has been used as a vehicle of expression for artists, and of particular interest in this study, the African-American artist, we do not know what the dance experience means to these individuals. Prior research has not explored the creation of dance as both a personal and cultural phenomenon for African Americans. No one has looked at how the African-American artist is impacted by internal and external forces and how these forces become manifested in the work they create.

To examine these questions and uncover salient themes in the choreography of the African-American artists in this study, an interpretive qualitative design using life history was employed. Twelve professional African-American dancers, choreographers, and educators were interviewed about their experiences as choreographers. The analysis revealed how outside forces (i.e., life experience, socio-political and economic forces, history, music, and religion) impact the artists and become manifested in their choreographic works. The findings disclosed how

these artists take what they have learned about self from personal experiences (i.e., life, emotions) and transform that knowledge into dance. The dance making of these individuals comes from their personal experience. Their culture informs their view, which influences their art, manifesting itself in the choreography they create, producing a new and transformed culture of awareness.

The reasons the participants choreograph are descriptive, educative, and prescriptive in nature. They use dance to tell stories, communicate, educate, raise awareness of social issues, and in some instances create change in society. The findings indicated these individuals found the dance experience to be empowering, transforming, and liberating. Several of the participants disclosed the dance experience provided an emotional, spiritual, or physical release. Although there was no agreement regarding the use of the term "Black dance," the participants indicated an African-American aesthetic present in the choreographic works of many African-American artists.

NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

PERCEPTIONS OF THE MEANING OF DANCE CHOREOGRAPHY BY CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN-AMERICAN DANCERS, CHOREOGRAPHERS AND EDUCATORS

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF APPENDICES

PREFACE

Why Do People Dance?

"To dance is to live…to live is to dance." (Unknown)

Ask any dancer why they dance, and they will most likely reply that they can't imagine doing anything else. Dancers are so devoted to their art they will rehearse for hours on end, enduring pain and injury, yet if given a choice, they will always choose to dance. It is their passion for the art that drives them to do what they do. Dancers sustain an underlying joy when they dance in spite of adversity. But what is it that draws a person to engage in the act of dance? Why are some people driven to dance?

My Personal Interest in the Study

The philosophy behind my research is based on my personal experience as a dancer, choreographer and educator. Being a dancer is having more than a vocation, it defines who we are. Whether teaching, choreographing, or performing, we are because we dance. Dance makes us complete; it is a calling and a passion. For most, a dancer's rewards are not monetary; they are emotional, physical and

spiritual. Dance is the physical expression of the heart and the spirit. To dance is to feel connected, empowered, liberated, and transformed.

The process of creating a dance can provide a meaningful experience for the creator (the choreographer), allowing the artist to externalize internal thoughts. This process becomes complete when the work is performed by the dancer for an audience to view. The dance experience can be an effective medium for creating meaning, gaining an awareness of self and better understanding our lives. Because the medium of dance requires discipline, fortitude and tenacity, it provides an opportunity for the artist to gain additional insight into oneself with each new encounter (Nadel & Miller, 1978).

My personal interest in this study grew out of a self-questioning of my own ontological awareness and why dance is such a vital force in my life. What is it about the dance experience that makes me complete? Why are some people compelled to dance and create dance? Is there a connection between the dance experience and life experience?

Growing up in a White middle-class neighborhood on the south side of Chicago in the 1960s, I attended a racially integrated high school in the city of Chicago and participated in extracurricular activities, such as the girls' choral group, student council, the school newspaper, and cheerleading. I always felt that the students worked cooperatively regardless of race or religion to accomplish goals with the anticipation of letting loose on Saturday night at the YMCA dance.

An honors student, I managed to maintain my grade point and still find time to perform in the local theatre guild's musical productions every year. This experience was the catalyst that drove me to pursue my dreams of a career in dance. I earned a scholarship to study dance in college where I learned a new vocabulary of movement that included rolling on the floor, over bodies and crawling through streams of toilet paper. I felt less than thrilled when for my first dance concert I was choreographed to lie on the floor under a parachute kicking my legs in a frenzy. One can only imagine my supreme delight when the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater came to my school and not only performed but also taught a master dance class. I was finally dancing!

Decades later, I am still dancing, having taught and performed across the country and internationally. Today, I can say that I am indeed dancing to my own drum, but the beat has changed. My charge is no longer self-centered but for the concerns of meeting the needs of my students. My mission is to instill the passion I have for dance into the hearts, souls, and bodies of the students at Chicago State University. Chicago State University, located on the south side of the city of Chicago, is a commuter campus with approximately 7,000 students. The ethnographic makeup consists of African-American, Hispanic, Asian, and European-American middle-class students. When I was hired in 1998 as assistant professor and dance director in the Department of Health, Physical Education and Recreation, I brought my own personal experiences with a strong background in

musical theater to my teaching. As I became familiar with the backgrounds of my students, I realized the need to expand the range of material I was using to more effectively meet their needs.

I began my research on African Americans in dance because of a desire to become better informed about the history of Black dance in the United States and to share this knowledge with my students. As a dance major at the University of Illinois during the 1970s, I had only learned about the European-American pioneers in dance: Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, and Isadora Duncan. There was no mention of the contributions of the African-American dance legends.

Through my research, I learned of the struggles the African-American dance pioneers Asadata Dafora, Pearl Primus and Katherine Dunham made in order to gain respect for their art. In a time of racial segregation and even cultural discrimination, African-American dance legends Alvin Ailey and Arthur Mitchell created dance companies for African-American dancers to train and perform on the concert stage. They proved that these dancers could not only achieve competence in concert dance forms but excel in modern dance and ballet (Lacy, 2000).

My choice of music and subject matter for my dances began to change as I developed a new interest in the musical styling of Nina Simone, Miles Davis, and Yolanda Adams. Although I continued to use traditional pieces such as *All That Jazz, Jump Jive N Wail,* and *Coppelia*, the repertoire of dances for our semester concerts became infused with the works of Ailey, Primus, and Dunham. Among the

dances I was particularly inspired to create with my students were *Four Women, Stormy Weather, Rainbow Round My Shoulder, People Get Ready,* and *Strange Fruit.* I was driven to tell the stories of the African-American experience and create awareness of this rich and vital history through dance.

During my ongoing research and participation in the Black College Dance Exchange's annual conventions for the past nine years, I have gained a new perspective into the unique and exciting world of the African-American dance experience. Whether taking or observing a class taught by an African-American dance master or watching a performance by an African-American professional dance company, I have felt a sense of vitality, urgency, and an emotive force that seems to drive the dance movements. There is an intensity in the performance level that is so powerful and electrifying, it completely engages the audience, making them one with the experience. There are no observers in the African-American dance encounter; all become participants.

When I attended the Black College Dance Exchange for the first time in 1999 at Prairie View A & M University, I recall dance master Cornelius Carter telling the class, "Today, we are all going to dance Black," and I was ready for the opportunity. As a result of my experiences, I began to ask myself the following questions. What is it about the Black dance experience that makes it so engaging and unique? What creates the feeling of intensity in African-American dance? What is it that sets this group of artists apart from other dancers? Is there a difference

between dance performed and choreographed by African-American artists and European-American dancers?

As a member of the dance community, I have a vested interest in enriching the literature on dance in America. It is because of the limited research on the contributions of African Americans in modern dance that I began my research. This study developed from a curiosity about the meaning of the dance experience for the African-American artist. How is the African-American dance experience connected to life experience and history?

As I began my investigation, I enlisted the support of the dancers, choreographers, and educators of African-American descent with whom I had become acquainted through my participation at dance conventions, classes, and performances. Because of this association, a level of openness and trust was already established. The interview process was a sharing of information, an open-ended interview, rather than a rigid adherence to questions and answers. The individuals I asked to interview for the study were not only cooperative but also interested in the project and appreciative of being able to share their experiences.

It is with pride and great humility that I have undertaken this research investigation. I would like to acknowledge all of the participants in this study for giving their time to this study. I would also like to thank them for their forthrightness in sharing their personal feelings in response to my interview questions. Looking at the African-American dance experience from a European-

American female perspective, I am cognizant of the power of my voice in reporting the findings of my study. Because the names of my participants will be used in this study, I will remain sensitive to the data and report it as objectively as possible.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Background

"Art cannot be divorced from life – it is of life's essence." (H'Doubler, 1968, p.xxi)

Dance is more than a visual art form; it is also a means of communication and expression to inform its audience. There is a force within each of us that drives us to express our inner feelings. The medium of dance gives us the ability to translate human emotions and thoughts into an artistic form. It is this freedom of expression through movement that makes dance so powerful.

Dance has been a form of expression for humankind since the beginning of time. Before any formal language existed, dance was used as a means of communication. In ancient cultures, dance was synonymous with every aspect of life–love, work, and ritual. Dance was a way of life, a celebration, connecting humans to the universe. As a means of preserving cultural traditions or celebrating life events, dance has played an instrumental role in the lives of people throughout the world (Sorell, 1967).

Throughout history, dance has been perceived as diversely as the various cultures that have engaged in its practice. Any attempt to accurately study dance requires studying the culture, as well. Dance cannot be isolated from its culture. The dance culture of a group of people is about more than the activity of dancing, placing the dance event within the context of place and time (Hazzard-Gordon, 1983, 1990).

Recognizing the importance of dance in African culture is essential in understanding the important role dance has played for African Americans in this country (Cayou, 1971; Hazzard-Gordon, 1983). From slavery to emancipation, from the Great Migration North to the Civil Rights Movement, African Americans have faced insurmountable challenges. Dance has been one of the most important means of cultural survival for African Americans (Malone, 1996).

The Africans who were brought to America as slaves were not free, yet they experienced a freedom of expression and spirit through dance (Heckscher, 2000). Dance was one thing enslaved Africans could bring with them to the New World (Jonas, 1992). The music, songs, and dance that retained African cultural heritage could not be destroyed by slavery (Holland, 2002). Dance provided a vehicle for helping African Americans preserve cultural traditions, maintain ethnic identity, become empowered, and experience freedom. Dancing was a way of life – to dance was to be free. "The response to freedom was dancing, because the one who danced had always been, if only for a moment, free" (Heckscher, 2000, p. 397).

The history of Black dance in America is the story of a cultural heritage and the crucial role African-American artists played in the development of dance as an American art form (Lacy, 2000). The African-American dance pioneers Asadata Dafora, Katherine Dunham, and Pearl Primus struggled to gain respect for their art. By looking at significant events in the history of African-American dance, we can see how artistic expression was a reaction to the socio-cultural conditions in America (Shapiro, 1998). Dance has not only helped to define history but has been a catalyst to create awareness in society (Jonas, 1992). Enabling the past to come alive through the medium of dance has allowed African Americans to revisit, reinterpret, and reclaim history (Perpener, 2001).

African Americans still struggle for equality and the right to be free. Throughout the course of history, African Americans have dealt with issues of social, political, economic, and cultural discrimination. This is a history of cultural survival with slavery at its core (Lacy, 2000). Tracing the evolution of African dance in America, from its cultural roots to the concert stage, allows us to understand the crucial role dance has played in the lives of African Americans (Creque-Harris, 1992). The medium of dance reflects the conflicts and struggles African Americans have endured throughout history. African-American choreographers have employed the medium of dance as a platform to speak out about these injustices (Lacy, 2000). "All art holds a mirror to the society that produces it" (Jonas, 1992, p. 128).

The African-American culture is one that is rich in history. Dance has been the medium allowing generations to pass on traditions, engage in ceremonial practices, tell stories, create artistic forms, express feelings, make political statements, socialize, and be entertained (Jonas, 1992). Through dance we can recreate the past and understand the values of humankind throughout history. Dance is a reflection of life, it is a living history of its people. "A history of the people at any given time is contained in the dances they do. So the dances of the twenties, the thirties...tells us something about the culture" (J. Zollar, interview, 2004). "Dance more than any aspect of culture has been used by blacks to give voice to the ethos of the black experience" (Hazzard-Gordon, 1983, p. 2).

The Problem

The research conducted on African-American dance has primarily been done from an historical perspective, chronicling the days of slavery to the present (Cayou, 1971; Heckscher, 2000). Studies have shown the important role dance played in preserving African cultural traditions during the Middle Passage to the West Indies and the New World (Emery, 1988). Dance has been one of the most important means of cultural survival for African Americans (Malone, 1996). From the Ring-Shout to the Cakewalk, from the concert stage to the streets, dance has been used for celebration, ceremony, ritual, and entertainment (Emery, 1988).

Studies have focused on the contributions of African-American dancers to modern dance in America and their struggle to achieve prominence in the arts. These investigations have included the works of African-American dance legends Asadata Dafora, Pearl Primus, and Katherine Dunham (Burt, 2004; Creque-Harris, 1992; Dixon Gottschild, 1996; Heard, 1999; Emery, 1988; Franko, 1997; Lacy, 2000; Sherrod, 1998). These primary Black dance pioneers or dance griots brought a new awareness of African dance to the public, enabling it to emerge as an art form. The choreography of these pioneers and others, including Zora Neale Hurston, Ismay Andrews, and Helmsley Winfield, was an expression of Black consciousness, a vehicle to create social change and a response to the social, political, economic, and cultural conditions of the times (Garafola, 1994; Long, 1989; Malone, 1996; Prevots, 1998; Sherrod, 1998). Dance scholars have explored the choreography of noted artists Alvin Ailey, Talley Beatty, Donald McKayle, and Eleo Pomare as a way to make social statements and express the lived experience of the African American (Albright, 1997; Chatterjea, 1997; Emery, 1988; Goler, 1995; Moss, 2003; Sherrod, 1998). Dance more than any other aspect of culture has been a way for African Americans to give voice to the Black American experience (Hazzard-Gordon, 1983, 1990).

Studies have also examined the aesthetics, characteristics, and common elements found in African dance forms (Stearns & Stearns, 1968; Thorpe, 1990; Welsh Asante, 1996) and looked at the "Africanist" elements present in African-

American dance forms and their pervasive influence on European-American dance and American culture (Dixon Gottschild, 1996). Dance scholars have looked at dance as a form of identity and the influence of race, gender, and class (Albright, 1997; Deans, 2002, Fischer-Hornung, & Goeller, 2001; Foulkes, 2002; Hanna, 1988; Manning, 1998; Tomko, 2000). More recent studies have challenged the concept of a separate genre labeled "Black Dance" or African-American Dance (DeFrantz, 2002; Dixon, 1990; Dixon Gottschild, 2003a).

Although we know that dance has been a vehicle of expression for artists, and of particular interest in this study, the African-American artist, we don't know what the dance experience means to these individuals. One area of research that has not been investigated is the connection between the dance experience and life experience from the dancer's perspective, as a choreographer and educator. Prior research has not explored the creation of dance as both personal and cultural phenomena for African Americans. No one has looked at how African-American artists create culture through their choreography and how their work creates meaning for them. Further research is needed to understand the meaning and the role of dance choreography for contemporary African-American artists. Looking at the motivation behind the work provides an opportunity to understand why some African-American artists create choreography.

This study illuminates an area in dance that has not received sufficient

attention. It provides new insight into the meaning of the choreographic process. The voices of contemporary African-American artists must be heard to continue the legacy of African Americans in dance. The life histories of the African-American artists in this study will shed light on the role of dance not only as a form of expression, but as a creation of culture. Looking at the world through the choreography of these artists can provide a means to understanding the past and inform the future.

Research Questions

In order to understand the connection between dance and life and how the dance experience provides meaning for some African-American professional dancers, choreographers, and dance educators, the study will address the following questions:

1. Why, how, and what do these African-American dancers choreograph about?
2. How does the dance experience provide meaning for them?
3. What are their perceptions of the meaning of "Black Dance"?

The Purpose of This Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the reasons why some African-American dancers, choreographers, and educators choreograph; how they

choreograph; and what they choreograph about. This study will also examine how the dance experience provides meaning for the participants and their perceptions of the meaning of "Black Dance." What role has dance making played and continues to play for these African-American artists and educators? How do African-American professional dancers, choreographers and dance educators perceive the medium of dance 1) as a voice to tell their stories, communicate, and create social awareness and 2) as a way to create meaning from these experiences.

Dance has provided a vehicle for African Americans to preserve cultural traditions, maintain ethnic identity, become empowered and experience freedom. This study will show the ways some African-American artists view dance and the creative process and how it creates meaning in their lives. Interviews with selected contemporary dancers, choreographers, and dance educators will reveal how their work provides meaning for them.

The Significance of the Study

Dance offers a way to gain an understanding of ourselves through artistic expression within a cultural context. The role of dance in education can contribute to a greater understanding of ourselves and of our world by helping us realize how our personal experiences have shaped our views (Shapiro, 1998). The body as the instrument is the source of expression in dance. It is also the site for critical reflection and the embodiment of all of our experiences. The body defines who we

are. When we shed the traditional assumptions about dance (i.e., body type, race, gender), dance can be liberating physically and emotionally (Shapiro, 1998).

Why is this important to adult educators? From the humanist perspective of Maslow and Rogers, the goal of adult education is self-actualization (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Dance can be an effective medium for aiding in the self-actualization process. Through the performance, choreographic, or teaching experience, dance can provide the individual the medium to create meaning, gain awareness and better understand self and life. The creative process allows individuals the opportunity to explore life issues through this unique art form. For those who embrace dance as a career, it affords the chance to learn something new about oneself with each experience.

As adult educator and philosopher Jack Mezirow (1990) stated, "There is no need more fundamentally human than our need to make sense of our experiences" (p.11). Mezirow's Transformation Theory is about learning that creates change – change in the way we see ourselves – in relation to other human beings and in relation to the lifeworld – the world we have created (Welton, 1995). Transformational learning focuses on learning as a meaning-making activity. The dance experience is a learning experience, affording the individual the opportunity to make meaning of one's experience. Learning is a process of constructing meaning and a way for people to make sense of their experiences (Lindeman, 1961; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Wilson & Hayes, 2000).

According to the seminal work of dance educator Margaret H'Doubler (1968), dance provides an outlet for understanding the inner experiences of the individual: "Dance in education does not exist just for the pleasure of dancing, but through creative effort in giving aesthetic forms to significant experience it is hoped students will develop their creative power and in turn improve themselves as persons" (p. xxvi).

Dance allows for the possibility of gaining understanding of life experiences through creative expression. The dancers, choreographers, and educators in this study were able to tell their personal stories about the dance experience and how it has created meaning for them. It reveals how outside forces (i.e., life experience, socio-political and economic forces, history, music, and religion) are manifested in their choreographic works. The data show how these dancers, choreographers, and educators take what they have learned about self from personal experiences and transform that knowledge into dance. The dance making of these individuals comes from their personal experience. Their culture informs their view, which in turn informs their art and creates a new and transformed culture of awareness. The results will provide dance scholars with a better understanding of how the choreographic experience is rooted in life experience (i.e., African American).

The research intends to bridge the gap between dance, life, and education. Understanding the role choreography has played for African-American artists will broaden the perspectives of dance scholars everywhere. This study will illuminate

an area that has not been studied before. It will add to the existing literature on dance by supplementing it with interviews from contemporary African-American professional dancers, choreographers and dance educators about the role dance plays as a form of expression and meaning.

Looking at the ways the individuals in this study have created meaning in their lives through dance can provide insight into the important role dance has played and continues to play for the African-American artist. The role of dance in adult education may be an effective means for adult educators to facilitate the meaning-making process using dance as the medium of creative expression. Employing an arts-based educational approach can foster the discourse necessary to create the reflective critical thinking necessary to create social awareness and, in some cases, change (Clover, 2006). The choreographic works of these individuals and other choreographers can provide adult educators a vehicle for creating discourse about life issues which may be otherwise too sensitive to discuss.

This study examines how these African-American artists use dance to express their feelings and ideas. Looking at the stories they tell and the motivation behind their work can inspire readers in their own pursuits and endeavors. Storytelling is one way for individuals not only to gain greater awareness into the meaning of one's own life but also a means to develop new perspectives and ways of knowing the world by looking at the stories other people tell.

Theoretical Framework

All research, whether conducted from a positivist or qualitative position, must have a meaningful framework or paradigm. I have approached this qualitative study using a constructivist interpretive framework. An interpretive framework supports the reflexive nature of my study. "The key to understanding qualitative research lies with the idea that meaning is socially constructed by individuals in interaction with their world" (Merriam & Associates, 2002, p. 3). My belief is that knowledge is constructed by the individual within a social and historical context. This paradigm is based on the theory that humans do not discover knowledge so much as create it from experience. All knowledge takes place within the conceptual framework we have constructed for ourselves and continually modify to make sense of our experiences (Collin, 1997; Fuss, 1989; Gergen, 1994; Hacking, 1999).

The process of creating meaning from a constructivist viewpoint may be either individual or social (Steffe & Gale, 1995). The personal constructivist view looks at learning as a cognitive activity in which the individual creates meaning based upon personal experience (Driver et al., 1994; Piaget, 1972). The dancers, choreographers, and educators in this study create meaning from their experiences and transform that meaning into dance.

The social constructivist view claims that "knowledge is constructed when individuals engage socially in talk and activities about shared problems or tasks.

Making meaning is thus a dialogic process involving persons-in-conversation, and learning is seen as a process by which individuals are introduced to a culture by more skilled members" (Driver et al., 1994, p. 7). "This approach involves learning the culturally shared ways of understanding and talking about the world and reality" (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 262). A social constructivist perspective is also appropriate for this study because the choreography created by the individuals in this study affords the dancer as performer and the audience to discover new ways of knowing by engaging in the dance experience.

To understand a particular social action (e.g., dancing, choreographing, teaching), the researcher must grasp the meaning in order to understand it (Schwandt, 2000). As the researcher, I am interested in 1) how the individuals interpret their experiences, 2) how they construct their world, and 3) what meaning they give to their experiences (Merriam & Associates, 2002). My role is to interpret the data gathered from the participants in this study and construct meaning. How do these African-American artists view dance as a way to create meaning in their lives and how does the dance experience make them feel? My goal is not merely to reflect (mirror) or look through (window) what they say, but to shine a light on the stories they tell in order to make sense of them. I will try to illuminate (lantern) an area that has not been examined before and create insight and understanding into the connection of dance and life for these individuals (Shank, 1994).

Limitations

My study is a convenient sample of twelve dancers, choreographers, and educators who have all been professionals in the field of dance for twenty years or more and identify themselves as African-American. Although these individuals represent a cross-section of the country, having lived in states including Alabama, Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Louisiana, Maryland, Missouri, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia, I am aware that my sample is not representative of the feelings and experiences of all African-American dancers, choreographers, and educators.

I am fortunate to have somewhat of an insider's (emic) viewpoint because of my own professional career as a dancer and educator, association with dance organizations, attendance at dance concerts and conventions, and mutual appreciation and common bond of dance. However, my findings may be limited by what these individuals told me in response to my questions and the stories they chose to share. I am aware that I can never view the dance experience through the exact same lens as my subjects. As a White female dancer, choreographer, educator, researcher, and writer, my experiences may be different from those of the artists I interviewed. While I recognize my own privilege and perceptional framework, I do not believe that this invalidates my work.

My own experiential knowledge in dance is both a strength and weakness. While my personal background, knowledge and experiences increase my

subjectivity to the study, it is my bias that makes me the researcher that I am and provides the very basis for the story that I am able to tell (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). I am honored and deeply humbled by the opportunity to interview these very talented individuals and write about their perceptions of the choreographic experience. This experience has given me a greater appreciation for the contributions of not only the African-American legends in dance but also for the contemporary artists, as well.

Definition of Terms

African American – an American of African descent.

Black – persons of color of African descent, a member of a dark-skinned race.

Choreography – developing a series of movements and phrases that create cohesive and thematic unity, which in turn produce a dance with a beginning, middle, and an end (Kassing & Jay, 2003, p. 220).

Culture – the arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement regarded collectively; the customs, civilization, and achievements of a particular time or people studied.

Dance culture – the social, political, religious, and psychological climates in which the dance is performed (Kassing & Jay, 2003, p. 184).

Dance – the human body rhythmically moving through space and time with energy and effort. Dance engages the dancer's physical, mental, and spiritual attributes to perform a dance form as a work of art, a cultural ritual, a social recreation, and an expression of the person. A dance form initiates from physical movement, rhythm, content, style, aesthetics, traditions, and mental and spiritual meanings that may be social, cultural, or religious.

Dance as an art is a conduit of expression and communication – the message and the medium. It provides a structure that may be intricate, precise, casual, or personal through which the dancer expresses movement, style and aesthetics. Dance is what entices the dancer in a continuous quest for knowledge about himself and his changing relationship to the dance (Kassing & Jay, 2003, p. 4).

Dance is human behavior composed (from the dancer's perspective, which is usually shared by the audience members of the dancer's culture) of purposeful (individual choice and social learning play a role), intentionally rhythmical, and culturally influenced sequences of nonverbal body movements mostly other than those performed in ordinary motor activities. The motion (in time, space, and with effort) has an inherent and aesthetic value (the notion of appropriateness and competency as viewed by the dancer's culture) and symbolic potential (Hanna, 1999).

Modern/Contemporary Dance – of the present time; contemporary choreographers explore every approach to choreography, using the past to inspire their own unique works.

In this study, the word "dance" will often serve as a collective term for dance performing, dance making, dance teaching, and dance appreciation.

Overview of the Dissertation

Chapter 2 is a review of the literature conducted in the area of dance. In Chapter 3, I explain my methodology and why I chose this approach. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 are life histories of the participants in the study. In Chapter 4, I look at dance as description and the life histories of Randy Duncan, Kirby Reed, Mel Tomlinson, and Pierre Lockett. In Chapter 5, I look at dance as educative discourse and the life histories of Iantha Tucker, Dianne Maroney-Grigsby, Peter Fields, and Joan

Hamby Burroughs. In Chapter 6, I look at dance as prescription and the life histories of Jawole Willa Jo Zolar, Charles Carter, Gary Abbott, and Germaul Barnes. Chapter 7 is about the dance experience, where I look at why, how, and what they choreograph and how the dance experience provides meaning. Chapter 8 looks at the perceptions of "Black Dance." Chapter 9 presents conclusions and recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Primary sources on African Americans in modern concert dance are limited. The literature encompasses the works of the African-American dance pioneers from an historical perspective, noting the struggle to be accepted by European-American mainstream cultural standards (Creque-Harris, 1992; DeFrantz, 2002; Dixon Gottschild, 1996; Emery, 1988; Haskins, 1990; Heckscher, 2000; Lacy, 2000; Laverty, 2003; Long, 1989; Manning, 2004; Perpener, 2001; Tucker, 1984).

The primary and secondary sources I have selected for this review are dissertations from well-known universities with a department in dance or ethnic studies, dating from 1946-2003, and articles, journals, books and video from 1938 to 2006. Although the review of the literature lends support to my study, the literature failed to reveal sources which directly addressed the perceptions of why African-American choreographers create dance and what the dance experience means to them. A review of literature failed to produce a life history study that interviewed African-American dance performers, dance makers, and dance educators on why they choreograph and how the experience provides meaning for them. A review of literature failed to exhibit a study of the life histories of African-American dancers,

choreographers, and educators as to why they choreograph and what the experience means to them.

One area of research that has not been investigated is the connection between the dance experience and life experience from the dancer's perspective as a choreographer and educator. Prior research has not explored the creation of dance as both personal and cultural phenomena for African Americans. No one has looked at how African-American artists create culture through their choreography and how their work creates meaning for them.

Early Beginnings

The medium of dance has been a means of expression, communication, and a way to tell stories since the beginning of time. It has played an important role in preserving cultural traditions and history. Studies have looked at the importance of dance in early civilizations (Dils & Albright, 2001; Highwater, 1978; Jonas, 1992; Sorell, 1967) and the significance in African and West Indian cultures (Burroughs, 1995; Creque-Harris, 1992; Green, 1996; Primus, 1946; Warren, 1972).

In *The Dance Through the Ages,* Sorell (1967) chronicles the development of dance from its early beginnings in "primitive" cultures around the world to dance as ritual, folklore and theater, the birth of ballet, the growth of modern dance, and dance in the media. He looks at the important role dance has played in preserving

cultural traditions and history, concluding with "Jazz and the Negro Dance." Reserving this section as the final chapter, Sorell notes,

> The Negro dance is one of the most viable and vital contributions of America to the theater dance. Its historic roots reach back as far as the first shipment of slaves to America. They brought with them the rich heritage of their native Africa, their rituals and religious dances, their ancestral memory of free-flowing movements and steps, and above all the innate rhythms of the race. The Negro dance developed in the 'New World' as 'a dance toward freedom.' (1967, p. 275)

Dance in African Culture

To understand the importance of dance to African Americans, it is necessary to dig deeper by going back to the Motherland. In *Atiba's a Comin': The Rise of Social Dance Formations in Afro-American Culture,* Hazzard-Gordon (1983) lays a foundation for such understanding. Recognizing the importance of dance in African culture is essential to understanding the development of a dance culture for African Americans. The research reveals that dance is not a separate art in African culture but an integral part of everyday life central to self-identity. Participation in communal dances, ceremonial or ritualistic, provided a form of identity. Dance is sacred in African culture. It is more than a form of entertainment but a spiritual force, calling upon the spirit or loa. The African dancer embodies the past and the present, expressing this in the dance (Hazzard-Gordon, 1983, 1990).

The significance of dance in African and African-American culture has been

one area of investigation. Welsh Asante (1996) provides insight into African dance traditions with her compilation of essays from distinguished dance scholars in *African Dance: An Artistic, Historical, and Philosophical Inquiry.* Throughout history, dance has been synonymous with every aspect of life – love, work, and ritual. As a means of preserving cultural traditions or celebrating life events, dance has played an instrumental role in the lives of people throughout the world. African dance is a form of communication based on language. "Traditional African dance is the integrated art of movement that is controlled by her music which is governed by her languages. African dance is not like any other form of dance. If African music would not exist, then African dance would not exist" (Green, 1996, p. 13).

Primus (1946) launched her anthropological study of African dance as the source of African-American dance. Studying dance movements in Africa and the American South, she found that African dance takes everyday experiences and translates them into movement. The subject matter is inclusive of life events such as birth, death, praying for rain, protecting the gods, and honoring the ancestors (Primus, 1946). Events, such as the passages of seasons and life-cycle transitions, become even more meaningful through the dance experience. "Dance in Africa is a way of life, a source of communication, and history reenacted through movement" (Green, 1996, p. 26). "There is no 'art for art's sake' in Africa" (Nicholls, 1996, p. 43). Dance was a fundamental element of African aesthetic expression in religious, secular, and recreational dance forms (Emery, 1988).

Tucker (1984) continued this investigation in her work, *The Role of Afro-Americans in Dance in the United States from Slavery Through 1983.* She found that in African culture, dance was not only a way of life but a celebration through the stages of acceptance into the tribal community. Dance was also used to prepare the youth with survival skills necessary in life such as war or the hunt. There were dances for victory, fertility, the harvest, and to drive away evil spirits.

The Slave Trade

The importation of slaves from the Gold Coast-Niger area in Africa to the New World began in the seventeenth century (although slave trading began as far back as the fifteenth century). When the slave captains went ashore to bargain for slaves, they found more than the native Africans; they found a culture rich in art, music, and dance. The traders noted the complex rhythms and characteristics present in these dances (e.g., the beat of the drum, circular formation, the clapping, and stamping of the feet). Dance was a fundamental element of African aesthetic expression in religious, secular, and recreational dance forms (Emery, 1988).

Emery's (1988) *Black Dance in the United States from 1619 to 1970* is a well-documented account of dance from its beginnings in Africa to the Middle Passage, through the islands of the Caribbean, to the plantations in the United States. When the Africans were taken into bondage, dance was used to lure the slaves aboard the ships. During the Middle Passage, as the slaves were transported

to the West Indies and the New World, they were subjected to inhumane conditions. Dance was used as a means of forced exercise under the lash or the watchful eye of a gun. The sacred dances the Africans had once enjoyed became a form of resistance as refusal to dance could result in negative consequences while skilled dancing offered rewards (Emery, 1988).

The West Indies

Emery provides documentation on the dances of the West Indies, noting similarities in the dances among the islands. The dancers chanted as they moved, accompanied by complex rhythms of the drums and other percussion instruments. Among the occasions the dances were performed were for holidays, weddings, harvests, and funerals. Emery includes a brief description of Katherine Dunham's anthropological study of dance in Haiti. In this section, Dunham describes the funeral dance, the Banda, as an expression of sorrow and joy, a release of emotion with anticipation that in dying the soul would return to Africa.

While in Haiti, Dunham lived and shared the lives of the people. Dunham's investigation into the dances the African slaves brought to Haiti revealed they also brought with them a temple of gods called loas or mysteres (Dunham, 1983). She found the dances to be religious, ceremonial, ritualistic, and social. Dunham discovered the dances served the psychological function of externalizing personal feelings as a means of communication and expression. Dunham became immersed

in Vaudun, a practice in which spirits possess the dancer's body. Her expertise in performing Yan Va Lou, a sacred dance, resulted in her initiation as a priestess into the religion (Burroughs, 1995; Burt, 2004; Creque-Harris, 1992; Ramsey, 2000).

Tucker (1984) notes that the West African Dahomeans who brought their strong religious beliefs with them to Haiti resulted in Afro-Haitian Vaudun. The sacred and religious dances, the Vaudun ceremonies of Haiti, the Shango rites of Trinidad, the Obeah of Jamaica, and the Nanigo of Cuba, were all of African origin. The culmination of these ritualistic dances was possession by the spirit. These studies provide evidence of the strong spiritual connection in the dances of African origin.

Peter Fields's study *The Eclectic Approach of Black Dance* (1992) refers to the many sources of ethnic identity which includes religion. The calling upon the gods during worship may result is the person becoming possessed by a power greater than his/her own. In the Haitian practice of Vaudun, the supernatural spirit may dominate the person, placing him/her in state of limited consciousness or trance. This experience may be witnessed in church services even today, when a person becomes so possessed by the spiritual force that he/she begins to dance. The study of the spiritual force as central to Black dance has been the subject of investigation by Fields. His findings may provide insight as to how the dance experience provides spiritual meaning for the African-American artists in my study.

Slavery in the New World

Dance scholars have explored the development of African-American dance culture within geographic regions and the growth of African-American dance formations in the United States as a reaction to the social, political, economic, and cultural forces of the times (Hazzard-Gordon, 1983; Heckscher, 2000). Investigations have analyzed African-American vernacular dance as a movement system and how the Africanisms present in the dance allowed it to remain a vital, dynamic, and distinctive dance form (Malone, 1996).

The seminal work of Gutman (1976) *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom: 1759-1925,* looks at the creation of a slave culture. The transformation from African to African-American slave in the New World showed great strength, resiliency, and adaptability. The slave drew upon the principles, values, and understandings he had maintained in Africa as a resource to adapt to this new environment. Calling upon ancestral memories, African traditions, and life on the plantation, he created a new culture: the African-American culture.

In spite of the conditions of slavery, many of the African customs and traditions managed to survive. Holland (2002) notes, in *Black Recreation: A Historical Perspective,* that the music, songs, and dance that retained African cultural heritage could not be destroyed by slavery. Dance was one thing enslaved Africans could bring with them to the New World that could not be taken away.

The constant arrival of slaves from Africa and the West Indies kept the rhythms and dances alive on the plantations. By the end of the eighteenth century, millions of Africans from various tribal communities were forced into bondage together. The intermixture of these traditions created new dance forms (Tucker, 1984). The geographic region and the type of labor the slaves did on the plantation also played a distinctive role in retaining old and establishing new customs. What emerged was a slave culture that was regional in flavor (Hazzard-Gordon, 1983).

On the plantations in the United States, dancing under the lash forced the African slave to dance not for religious purposes, celebration, or even joy, but for survival. Dancing was no longer an intrinsic part of life but a form of entertainment (Tucker, 1984). Using dance for such entertainment made it impossible to maintain the integrity of African dance (Creque-Harris, 1992; Hazzard-Gordon, 1983). Although dancing was encouraged, with dances held on holidays and for social events, the slave owners frequently ordered the slaves to dance for their own entertainment. As in the West Indies, there were certain dances for special occasions and holidays while others were reserved for religious purposes, the sacred dances. One of the dances that managed to survive in the New World was the Ring-Shout, a spiritual dance in which the dancers shuffled their feet around in a circle, working themselves into frenzy until they achieved possession by the spirit. Drumming had been banned but the rhythms of Africa remained strong in the hearts, souls, and bodies of the enslaved (Emery, 1988).

Heckscher (2000) takes an historical approach in *'All the Mazes of the dance': Black Dancing, Culture and Identity in the Greater Chesapeake World from the Early Eighteenth Century to the Civil War.* She looks at the important role dance has played in preserving African American cultural traditions and history from the days of slavery to the present and the reasons dance was so important to the slaves in the American South. Revisiting the struggle the slaves endured in order to maintain the African traditions, customs, and culture provides an understanding into the necessity of preserving the dances of African origin.

Dance provided a vehicle for helping African Americans preserve cultural traditions, maintain ethnic identity, become empowered, and experience freedom. Dancing was a way of life – to dance was to be free. The Africans who were brought to America as slaves were not free, yet they experienced a freedom of expression and spirit through dance. "The response to freedom was dancing, because the one who danced had always been, if only for a moment, free" (Heckscher, 2000, p. 397).

Dance was the one thing that could not be taken away from the Africans brought to America (Jonas, 1992). After a hard day of work, slaves would walk miles to the next plantation in search of a dance event for the pleasure of moving their bodies to the music of a banjo. The dance event enabled slaves to come together socially. Some would even risk being beaten or worse for stealing their master's horse to reach their destination. Others declared they would rather dance

than eat. Dance became not only a means of expression but restraint, and a means to defy the master's control (Heckscher, 2000).

Dixon Gottschild (2003a) examines the concepts of Black dance and the Black dancing body in *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool.* She perceives the transformative powers of dance to transport the body to "extraordinary flights of spirit" and explains that is why "traditional African religions are danced religions" (Dixon Gottschild, 2003a, p. 15). One cannot deny the emotional power of the dance experience. To dance was to become transformed. When engaged in the spirit of the dance, the slave could forget about his place in life by assuming an alternative identity as "slave." To dance was to partake in a world apart of sensuous movement, rhythm, energy, power, beauty, and creativity (Heckscher, 2000).

The above resources provide the basis for understanding the importance of dance to Africans as a means of communication, expression, identity, and spirituality. The embodied knowledge of the ancestral past could not be erased by slavery. To dance was to become transformed, to dance was to be free. Dance remained an integral part of life and the creation of culture in the New World.

Dance as cultural identity has been one subject of research for scholars. The majority of slaves preserved their personal and cultural identity through dance. The significance of using dance to preserve ancestral heritage was critical to identity and self-empowerment in order to create change in society (Heckscher, 2000).

Maintaining traditions and rituals was especially important for a group of people whose culture was disrupted, dispersed, and dislocated geographically (Sherrod, 1998). The dance culture of a group of people is about more than the activity of dancing. Dance culture is about the people who danced, what they danced about, why they danced, when they danced, where they danced and how they danced (Hazzard-Gordon, 1983, 1990).

The slaves took European elements of dance and combined them with African dance to create a new style that reflected life as an African-American. The integration of elements from African and European dance styles resulted in the creation of a new dance culture that was uniquely their own. The dance culture of a group of people is about more than the dance event. It must take into account who, what, why, where, when, and how they danced (Heckscher, 2000).

Dances held between the plantations became a cause for concern as these congregations provided opportunities to plan revolts. Religious gatherings and even fieldwork became a source of worry. The slave population soon outnumbered the European-Americans and a number of slave insurrections sprang up (Hazzard-Gordon, 1983). In 1739, when all drumming was banned to stop the transmission of drum signals, the slaves found other ways to accompany their dances, substituting the rhythms by clapping, stomping, patting their bodies, and vocalizing (Creque-Harris, 1992; Hazzard-Gordon, 1983).

Terry (1971) includes one chapter on Black dance in *The Dance in America.* He acknowledges the contributions of the African-American artists who not only created Black dance but an art form that has enriched North American culture and the entire world of dance. Terry stated that in 1740, shortly after the Cato Conspiracy, was when "Black Dance" really began. Drums had been banned to avoid another uprising against enslavement. Being resourceful, the slaves soon found other ways to make rhythmic sounds, like patting their bodies, stamping their feet, vocalizing, and hitting chicken bones together. By combining their rhythmic skills with the fancy footwork of European clogging, they produced the first dance form indigenous to the United States (aside from the Native American dance forms), tap dancing.

Post-Emancipation

The period between the Civil War and the 1890s was a time of transition for the African American, from slave to citizen. It is during this period that Hazzard-Gordon (1983, 1990) documents the rise of social dance formations: jook houses, rent parties, dance halls, membership clubs, night clubs, block parties, and the cotillion. Hazzard-Gordon (1983) states, "Social dancing links African Americans to their African past more strongly than any other aspect of their culture" (p. 3).

What role has dance played and continues to play in African-American culture? Malone's (1996) *Steppin' on the Blues: The Visible Rhythms of African-*

American Dance is an analysis of African-American vernacular dance as a movement system. Malone examines the roots of dance in African culture and shows how these traditions were continued in African-American dance. She demonstrates how the Africanisms present in dance in the Black community allowed it to remain a vital, dynamic, and distinctive dance form and a means of cultural survival. Malone reveals how the choreographed dances of vocal groups, marching bands, and fraternities were derived from Black social dance. Life experience has played an instrumental part in the creation of Black dance as we know it today. This vernacular dance form truly represents what American dance is.

From the Dance Hall to the Concert Stage

The contributions of African Americans to modern dance, dating back to the early 1800s with minstrelsy and the early Black musicals, has been one area of investigation in dance research (Emery, 1988; Haskins, 1990; Long, 1989). The Africans brought to America as slaves carried with them a tradition of rhythms and movements that produced the rich and vibrant dance that we call Black dance in America (Haskins, 1990).

Haskins traces the evolution of Black dance in his book, *Black Dance in America* (1990). Throughout history, the dancer has had to negotiate issues of race,

gender, and culture. Minstrelsy, a popular form of entertainment in the late 1820s, was performed by White male performers in blackface. The dancers portrayed stereotypes of the "Negro" as the shuffling idiot or the dapper dandy. William Henry Lane became the exception, as one of the few Black performers to dance in these primarily White shows, when he displayed incomparable syncopations with his feet, which would come to be known as tap dance. Known as Master Juba, Lane created his unique style of dance incorporating the upper body and arms, combined with the African Giouba step, the shuffle, slide and the Irish jig. Haskins cites the influence of African dance forms on the dances created that became popular in the United States, such as tap dance and the Charleston (Haskins, 1990).

Although a new curiosity for African rhythms and movement had developed, the images of Black Americans on stage in the postminstrel era were limited to stereotyped characterizations. Creque-Harris (1992) provides an historical analysis of the development of African-derived dance on the concert stage in *The Representation of African Dance on the Concert Stage: From the Early Black Musical to Pearl Primus.* European Americans remained reluctant to see African Americans perform in the classical traditions of opera and ballet. The success of the Black musical, from 1889 to 1913, introduced and popularized such social dance forms as the Cakewalk, Charleston, and Ballin' the Jack (Emery, 1988) and sparked interest in ethnic dance forms with the exotic moves of Josephine Baker (Kraut, 2003).

Long (1989) presents a comprehensive look at Black dance in the United States in *The Black Tradition in American Dance.* The book chronicles Black dance from the nineteenth-century minstrels to concert-theatrical dance. Long explores the period known as the Jazz Age or Harlem Renaissance: the dance hall and nightclub; Vaudeville and tap; and the Black musical which ended with the Great Depression. In response to the Depression, as part of the New Deal, the government funded arts programs which employed dancers. Modern dancers organized the Workers' Dance League in 1932, an alternative group that opposed dance for dance's sake. These artists placed emphasis on social and political consciousness and nondiscrimination (Perpener, 2001). At the same time, Black dancers were asking, "What shall the Negro dance about?" and White modern dancers were using Black themes in their work (Long, 1989, p. 22).

Beginning with minstrelsy and the early Black musicals, Creque-Harris (1992) traces the contributions of Asadata Dafora, Katherine Dunham, and Pearl Primus. She notes the acceptance of African dance on the concert stage due to several factors. Modern dance, of which African-based movement is so much a part, became increasingly popular in the 1930s. Although the role of African Americans in dance was limited by segregation and discrimination, first-generation modern dancers expanded the boundaries in dance by using ethnic themes and spirituals. The Harlem Renaissance brought a level of awareness to African-American artists (Locke, 1925) and through the contributions of legends like

Dafora, Dunham, and Primus achieved recognition for legitimatizing African-derived dance on the concert stage (Creque-Harris, 1992).

Socio-Cultural and Socio-Political Climate in North America

Sherrod (1998) provides an historical overview for her study, *The Dance Griots: An Examination of the Dance Pedagogy of Katherine Dunham and Black Pioneering Dancers in Chicago and New York City from 1931-1946,* looking at how the socio-cultural and socio-political climate in North America affected African Americans in dance. African-American dance was impacted by the historical events of World War I, the Great Migration North, the Roaring Twenties, and the Harlem Renaissance. At the end of World War I, tensions grew as African-American resistance to second-class status increased, yet this period, from 1919 to 1929, produced a decade of music and dance like none other. The "Roaring Twenties" or the "Jazz Age" was a time when all Americans came together, if for no other reason than to enjoy the music and dance (Sherrod, 1998).

African-American performers had gained notoriety for having skill as entertainers but were not yet recognized for their cultural aesthetic. The Harlem Renaissance ushered in a new group of artists from all over the United States, the Caribbean, and West Africa, bringing African-American art to a new level (Creque-Harris, 1992). At the same time, noted African-American leaders, such as W.E.B.

Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, and Marcus Garvey, strove to raise the level of African-American consciousness to a higher level socially, economically, politically, and culturally. Inspired by the efforts of these political leaders, African-American artists used literature, music, theater, and dance as an expression of the Black experience and as a forum to create awareness and social change (Sherrod, 1998).

The African-American Dance Pioneers

Studies have focused on the contributions African-American choreographers have made to the growth of modern dance in America and the struggle to achieve prominence in the arts (Creque-Harris, 1992; Dixon Gottschild, 1996; Lacy, 2000; Laverty, 2003; Sherrod, 1998). Perpener (2001) traces the contributions of African-American dance pioneers from 1925 -1990 in *African-American Concert Dance: The Harlem Renaissance and Beyond.* He refers to a glaring oversight of information on many significant figures who contributed to African-American dance. Perpener documents the influences of Helmsley Winfield, Edna Guy, Randolph Sawyer, Ollie Burgoyne, Charles Williams, Asadata Dafora, Katherine Dunham, and Pearl Primus. Following in the footsteps of these seminal artists, Perpener looks at the careers of Talley Beatty, Donald McKayle, Alvin Ailey, Gus Solomons, Eleo Pomare, Rod Rodgers, Dianne McIntyre, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, Blondell Cummings, Ralph Lemon, Bill T. Jones, Ron K. Brown, and Garth Fagan.

In 1988, Emery updated *Black Dance in the United States from 1619 to Today* with revised chapter headings. "Concert Dance Pioneers: 1920-1950" begins with "The Forerunners," Hemsley Winfield and Edna Guy ("First Negro Dance Concert in America"), followed by Charles Williams (Hampton Institute Creative Dance Group), Eugene Von Grona (American Negro Ballet), Wilson Williams (Negro Dance Company), and Asadata Dafora (the African Opera, *Kykunkor*). Asadata Dafora, from Sierra Leone, West Africa, came to America to promote African culture and educate all Americans about the history and traditions of African dance. The choreography of the forerunners and others, including Zora Neale Hurston, Ismay Andrews, and Helmsley Winfield, was an expression of Black consciousness and a vehicle to create social change. The choreography of African-American dancers was a response to the social, political, economic, and cultural conditions of the times.

Emery (1988) documents the contributions of "The Pioneers," Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus who paved the way for Black dancers to be accepted in mainstream concert dance. Dunham and Primus brought a new awareness of African dance to the American public, enabling it to emerge as an art form. These legendary pioneers wanting to build respect for African dance forms were successful in creating a new awareness of African dance by choreographing theatrical works for the concert stage that incorporated the characteristics and aesthetics found in African dance (Sherrod, 1998).

Katherine Dunham has been praised for her presentation of African-American dance as a serious art form. She was an artist who studied culture through the lens of a dancer. Ms. Dunham combined the two disciplines of dance and anthropology in her endeavor to represent the dance forms of African cultures more accurately than anthropologists had done in the past. Dunham was an artist who studied culture through the lens of a dancer. She wanted to know why Black people danced the way they do and found surprising similarities in their movements. (Sherrod, 1998). As a result of her research, Dunham produced her most notable work, L'Ag'Ya (1938), based on a Martinique folktale of a fighting dance that resembled martial arts (Lacy, 2000).

Dunham choreographed *Tropics* - representative of South America and the Caribbean islands; *Le Jazz Hot* - dances of urban and rural Black American culture; and *Primitive Rhythms* - borrowing from Polynesian, Cuban, and Mexican cultures. She took authentic dances from Africa, the Islands, Latin America, and the United States and added a theatrical flair to them (Perpener, 2001).

In an explanation for her interest in studying West Indian culture, Dunham said "...that a people de-racinated, denied full participation in a society in which they are obliged to live, inevitably turn backwards to ancestral beliefs" (Dunham, 1994, p. 198). Fighting to change the negative stereotypes associated with African movements by placing them within a cultural context, Dunham developed a system for teaching dance based on African-derived dance and cultural ideas. She

developed a new dance vocabulary of head rolls, isolation of the torso, undulation of the spine and pelvis, hip rolls, square feet, heel and toe presses, and then she put them all together moving across the floor. The Dunham Dance Technique is a combination of ballet and modern, combined with African stance, gesture, and rhythm (Sherrod, 1998).

Lacy (2000) provides a comprehensive look at African Americans in dance in the documentary film, *Free to Dance*. In looking at the work of Pearl Primus, we learn in order to gain an understanding of how ordinary Blacks worked and played in America, Primus went to the Deep South to live and immerse herself in their lifestyle. What she found was a spirituality in the people that informed their daily lives and rituals. *The Negro Speaks of Rivers* (1943) is a dance inspired by the poem by Langston Hughes. The Negro slave had transformed dance in the New World – this dance was a synthesis of African culture and life experience, created as the slave adapted to the conditions of his new environment (Lacy, 2000).

Primus became one of America's foremost specialists in West African dance. After studying in West Africa with the masters, she realized that dance in African culture is not a separate entity, but part of life. She found that not only did African dance have meaning, but that African dance was a whole language of movement. Primus remarked, "I shall never again use that term 'primitive' when speaking of African dance forms" (Primus, quoted in Creque-Harris, 1992, p. 147).

Social Justice

Pearl Primus's choreography is African-based with themes of slavery, spirituals, jazz and blues, social unrest, and the quest for democracy. In the thirties, Primus joined the New Dance Group, whose motto was "The dance is a weapon for social justice" (Creque-Harris, 1992). Her choreography was a reaction to the discrimination all around her: *Strange Fruit*, 1943, was a reaction to lynching in the south; *Hard Time Blues* told a story of sharecropping; and *Slave Market,* about the inhumanity of slavery (Creque-Harris, 1992). Primus introduced athleticism into dance with her five-foot jumps into the air. It was said that her leaps and screams were a form of social protest – a flight from anger. In other dances, the leaps represented hope or joy. The dancing and shouting helped to release pent-up emotions and act as a form of healing (Creque-Harris, 1992). Primus is known for her "dances of protest" or "message dances" (Emery, 1988).

Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, Dunham was a political activist fighting segregation by filing lawsuits and making public statements. In 1951, she premiered *Southland*, a piece about lynching, although it never played in the United States. In 1967, Dunham opened the Performing Arts Training Center, in East St. Louis, believing that dance would help solve the problems of inner city youth (Lacy, 2000).

As the arts began to flourish, African-American men and women felt a growing sense of unity. The Black dancers of the period took on a new social mission – to change how African Americans were viewed by the rest of the world. Katherine Dunham spoke of overcoming old stereotypes to bring attention to themselves as serious artists. "A major goal was to attain a status in the dance world that will give the Negro dance student the courage to really study, and a reason to do so...and to take *our* dance out of the burlesque to make it a dignified art" (Dunham, in Perpener, 2001, p. 18). Dunham wanted to "present dark-skinned people in a manner delightful and acceptable to people who have never considered them as persons" (Dunham, cited in Reynolds & McCormick, 2003, p. 341).

Life Experience

The story of African Americans in modern dance during the 1950s and 1960s was part of the most dramatic political and social upheaval in American history since the Civil War. The choreography of African-American artists from this period has been documented by Chatterjea (1997), Emery (1988), Goler (1995), Haskins (1990), Lacy (2000), Long (1989), Perpener (2001), Sherrod (1998), and Sorell (1967). The themes in modern dance were a reflection of the times and a response to a racist American society. Art imitated life and life imitated art. After two decades of turbulence, doors once closed to African Americans were being opened

and it became possible for these trained dancers to find careers in dance (Lacy, 2000). The African-American experience had become a source for choreographers to celebrate life, make social comments, and a way to ensure the survival of African Americans in this society (Goler, 1995). Influenced by slavery, colonization, civil unrest, and political struggle, African American choreographers had a story to tell (Cass, 1993; Chatterjea, 1997; Daly, 2002). The choreography of these artists was a response to the social, political, economic, and cultural conditions of the times (Garafola, 1994; Long, 1989; Malone, 1996; Prevots, 1998; Sherrod, 1998). Whether dance is used to entertain or make social statements, dance is a vehicle that speaks to society (Lacy, 2000).

Alvin Ailey formed the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in 1958 to provide more opportunities for African American modern dancers at a time when African Americans didn't even have civil rights. Ailey created dances that were a combination of modern, jazz, ballet and emotion. Set in a barrelhouse, *Blues Suite*, 1958, portrays life on the edge of poverty in the south (Lacy, 2000). In 1960, Ailey produced what would become his signature piece, *Revelations.* Set to the Negro spirituals he remembered, the dance tells the stories of the African-American experience, the hardships, and the struggle to prevail.

Talley Beatty broke away from the Dunham Company in 1945 to produce choreography that was provocative and passionate. *Southern Landscape,* 1947, had five sections: *The Defeat in the Fields, Mourner's Bench, My Hair Was Wet with*

the Mountain Dew, Ring Shout, and *Settin' Up,* inspired by Howard Fast's book "Freedom Road." In *The Mourner's Bench*, Beatty dances about his African-American experience and a life lost through segregation. *Come Get the Beauty of It While It's Hot* and *The Road of the Phoebe Snow* are dances about the African American in a European-American world (Sorell, 1967). As the 1950s and 60s progressed, he explored themes of African American life that supported the Civil Rights Movement (Lacy, 2000).

Donald McKayle, known for his vitality and representation of African-American rhythms on the stage, brought real life to the theatre with *Games* in 1950, his portrayal of street life in New York. *Rainbow Round My Shoulder*, 1959, is a dance about the hard labor, anger, and aspiration for freedom of Black men on a chain gang. *District Storyville,* a piece to remind us that joy is close to grief, recreates New Orleans in 1903 (Lacy, 2000). A humanistic choreographer, he uses narratives and deals with potent emotion conveyed through dramatic characters (Haskins, 1990)

Eleo Pomare often choreographed dances that made his audience uncomfortable (Lacy, 2000). *Blues for the Jungle*, 1966, depicts scenes of inhumanity from the slave auction block, to prostitutes, to drug use on the streets (Long, 1989). Pomare also creates dances based on visual and literary works or socio-political issues. In 1988, he was commissioned by the American Dance Festival to participate in a three-year project entitled, "The Black Tradition

in American Modern Dance," to preserve modern dance classics by African-American choreographers.

Due to the extraordinary talent and persistence of the dance pioneers Dunham, Primus, Ailey, Beatty, McKayle, Pomare and others, Black modern dance had become established in the 1940s. Inspired by life experience, these artists had a story to tell through their choreography. In 1969, Arthur Mitchell, the first Black dancer to perform with the New York City Ballet, broke new territory when he formed one of the first segregated "Black ballet" companies, the Dance Theatre of Harlem (Haskins, 1990). His company provided the training ground and opportunity for African Americans to prove they could not only compete but excel in ballet.

Autobiography

Cultural values embodied in the individual affect choreographic choices (Shapiro, 1998). These choices may include dance as a form of storytelling and autobiography (Goler, 1995). Goler looks at the choreography of three African-American women to compare how it functions as autobiography in *Dancing Herself: Choreography, Autobiography, and the Expression of the Black Woman Self in the Work of Dianne McIntyre, Blondell Cummings, and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar.* An autobiography is the story of one's life, written from the perspective of the person telling the story. It is a translation of how that person interprets one's

experience in the world. Dance as autobiography has been one way to make meaning of one's life through storytelling. McIntyre, Cummings and Zollar use their choreography to reaffirm self and become empowered. The marginalization of African-American women by race and gender is reason enough for the Black woman to validate her contributions to society (Goler, 1995).

Dianne McIntyre's search for self has her draw upon personal experience and those of the African-American experience. Although not narrative in its form, her choreography always has meaning. Her works *Up North, 1881, Smoke and Clouds, Triptych,* and *Freedom Now Suite* deal with oppression and resistance. *Take Off from a Forced Landing, Sigh of the Rock,* and *Memories* are about women, the obstacles they overcame, and support for one another. *Things Fall Apart, Melting Song, Just a Myth,* and *Fragment* are all about cultural change (Goler, 1995).

Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, founder of Urban Bush Women (UBW), uses choreography to speak to the African-American woman about her body. *Batty Moves* is a celebration of the African-American female body, one section of the dance being performed with the dancers' backs to the audience (Chatterjea, 1997). Zollar creates her dances from the lens of a feminist, her purpose to affirm the strength and beauty of African-American women (Goler, 1995). Zollar employs the African tradition of storytelling in her pieces. In *HairStories*, 2001, she tells the story of African- American women's hair and the conflict between beauty and self-

esteem. Zollar believes that the content and message in her dances is a valuable vehicle for expressing personal and social issues. Zollar formed her company "to explore culture as a catalyst for social change, creative expression, and spiritual renewal" (Zollar, quoted in Dixon Gottschild, 2003b, p. 24).

Dance as autobiography also provides an outlet for expression of the self but brings that experience into the present moment, allowing the dancer to engage with the audience (Albright, 1997). The oral tradition of storytelling is rooted in West African culture. The African griots used narratives and songs as a way to preserve and pass on history from one generation to the next (Lott, 2002). Dance was a custom through which Africans told stories, shared everyday experiences or celebrated life events. Dance as a form of storytelling is a style utilized by post-modern African-American choreographers, such as Garth Fagan and Jawole Zollar (Goler, 1995).

The Body as Identity

The body as the site of identity and embodiment of all of our experiences has been explored by several scholars. The following studies support using dance choreography as a way to gain understanding of one's experience. The female body and the connection between art, life, sexuality, community, spirituality, and

technique is the subject of Ananya Chatterjea's (1997) study, *Butting Out, Embodying Multiple Significations: Reading the Female Body in the Choreographies of Two Women of Color, Chandralekha and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar.* Chatterjea uses a postmodern feminist lens to analyze the choreography of Chandralekha, an East Indian choreographer, and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, an African-American choreographer. Her purpose is to show how the choreography of these artists reflects their activist agendas and how they use their choreography to deconstruct ways of knowing.

Dance offers a way to gain an understanding of self through artistic expression within a cultural context. Shapiro (1998) presents a compilation of essays intended to enlighten the reader on this subject in *Dance, Power, and Difference: Critical and Feminist Perspectives on Dance Education.* The body as the instrument is the source of expression in dance. It is also the site for critical reflection and the embodiment of all of our experiences. The body defines who we are. When we shed the traditional assumptions about dance (i.e., body type, race, gender), dance can be liberating physically and emotionally (Shapiro, 1998). Experiences embodied within the individual can be expressed through the medium of dance and provide a way to make meaning of history. According to Thompson, "Dance is the birthright and potential of all human beings" (quoted in Shapiro, 1998, p. 156). Dance making can provide a transformational experience for the choreographer, dancer, and the audience through the sharing of life stories,

history, and social issues. It can contribute to a greater understanding of ourselves and of our world by allowing us to see how personal experiences have shaped our views and perspectives (Shapiro, 1998).

Albright (1997) explores how cultural identities are negotiated and embodied in *Choreographing Difference: The Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance*. How does dance perform, revise, or re-inscribe notions of cultural identity, including representations of gender, race, sexuality, and ability? One chapter of particular interest to my study is the idea of rewriting history through dance using epic narrative. An epic narrative, like an autobiography, tells a story, but rather than focusing on one life, it encompasses a group or culture of people. Dance as epic narrative, or the new epic dance, is used to celebrate "the legacy of a people who survived conquest...in the spirit of those who refused to be defeated" (Albright, 1997, p. 151). For African Americans, the retelling of a story is meaningful as a way to "re-right" history by rewriting it from the perspective of that culture.

Connecting to the Past

Choreographers of the nineties had their own agenda. Many talented artists used the concert stage as a platform to speak out about personal issues ranging from identity and homosexuality to AIDS. There was also a revival of dances reflecting historically oppressed cultures. These choreographers celebrated the differences in dancers and the uniqueness of the individual. In *The Black Dancing Body: A*

Geography from Coon to Cool, Brenda Dixon-Gottschild (2003a) interviewed twenty-four contemporary artists, including Rennie Harris and Ron Brown, about their choreography and philosophical beliefs.

Rennie Harris, artistic director of Pure Movement, studied the connections between hip hop, the African ceremonial dances and the martial arts of the Capoeira to create his unique work, *Facing Mecca* (2001). His blending of dance across time illustrates the way dance can be used to unite people (Harris, 2004; Lacy, 2000).

Ron K. Brown founded Evidence, a dance company with a mission "to discuss race, class, gender, and assimilation" (Lacy, 2000). He studied young people in dance clubs to understand the movements and meaning behind their dance. Brown found that dancing provided a release and a chance to leave the real world behind. In the documentary *Free to Dance* (Lacy, 2000), Brown said, "It feels good to give yourself over to the dance, to just let your spirit go on that journey, being connected to the divine in the way that you're connected to that when you shout, when you praise in church." Looking at break dance and the hip-hop dance culture of today reveals how these dance forms evolved from African dance and the Capoeira (Lacy, 2000). Brown disclosed the importance of maintaining a connection to African culture for African-American artists: "As an African American, you're constantly trying to define yourself, to connect to something deep and ancient. You don't know where you began. So, for me as artist, traditional African dance is something I have to consciously reach back for, a hunt for

grounding" (Brown, quoted in Smith, 2005, Sect. 5, p. 1). Brown described his dances as "being physical narratives or physical journeys" (Dixon Gottschild, 2003a, p. 268). *Grace* (1999) is a journey of emotion, spirituality, and religious ritual. *Incidents* (1999) is a socially compelling work inspired by Black women's memories of slavery (Lacy, 2000).

Dance Pedagogy

Shapiro looks at how the role of dance in education can contribute to a greater understanding of ourselves and of our world by helping us realize how our personal experiences have shaped our views in *Dance, Power, and Difference: Critical and Feminist Perspectives on Dance Education* (1998). "What is the role of dance education and how can dance become a liberatory pedagogy?" (Shapiro, 1998, p. 13). Understanding the role of dance choreography for African American artists – why, how, and what they choreograph about – will broaden the perspectives of dance scholars everywhere.

Dance has played a critical role in the personal and societal transformation for African-American artists. Revisiting the past through dance has not only been a way to make history come alive, but a way to reinterpret and reclaim it (Albright, 1997). Feminist and adult education theorists posit that discourse is key to understanding how systems and structures have shaped the social dynamics in our country (hooks, 1994; Peterson, 1999). The medium of dance can foster such a

dialogue and lead to critical reflection and understanding of our views and perspectives.

Africanist Elements/Qualities

Studies have examined the aesthetics, characteristics, and common elements found in African dance forms (Stearns & Stearns, 1968; Thorpe, 1990; Welsh Asante, 1996) and looked at the "Africanist" elements present in African-American dance forms and their pervasive influence on European-American dance and American culture (Dixon Gottschild, 1996).

The influence of African and West Indian culture on the choreography of African-American artists helped in retaining the ethnic style and traditions of the motherland. In *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts* (1996), Dixon Gottschild looks at the influence of the following "Africanist" elements on American modern dance: paired opposites, polycentrism/polyrhythm, high-affect juxtaposition, ephebism, and the aesthetic of the cool. She defines "Africanist" as the "African and African-American resonances and presences, trends and phenomena; the African influence, past and present, and those forms that arose as products of the African diaspora, including traditions and genres such as blues, jazz, rhythm and blues, and hip hop....The pervasive African-rooted presence in everyday American lifestyles, called

'Africanisms,' are handed down by culture, are embodied within the individual" (Dixon Gottschild, 1996, p. xiv).

Welsh Asante explains how epic memory contributes to the African aesthetic and embodied knowledge in "Commonalities in African Dance: An Aesthetic Foundation" (2001). "The spiritual element is embodied within the epic memory sense. The African artist, recognizing the blessings from a god, draws upon the spirituality and epic memory in the creative process that becomes embedded in the work" (Welsh Asante, 2001, p. 149). This memory sense retrieved by the artist creates the emotional and spiritual part of the experience.

> It is the conscious and subconscious calling upon the ancestors, gods, mind, to permit the flow of energy so that the artist can create. It is more than submission to grant authority, present or ancestral; it is an innate recognition that the creative force is indeed a force and not the person performing the act of creation. The artist can reject it, kill it, or accept it, but the creative energies come from within in response to a spiritual initiator. The spiritual memory is embodied in the epic memory sense. The African artist recognizes the 'blessings' of the gods for his intentions. Spiritually, the artist's resources are limitless and he draws from the material world and the metaphysical. (Welsh-Asante, 2001, p. 149)

In *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool,* Dixon Gottschild (2003) speaks of soul and spirit as being interrelated and almost impossible to separate. She further elaborates that spirit and soul are embodied in the flesh. Embodied knowledge is the source of many African-American artistic expressions. These findings are important in understanding the choreographic works of the African-American artists in my study.

Black Dance

When Dance Black America convened in New York City in 1983, the question posed was, "What is Black dance?" Bill T. Jones replied, "Black dance can be about anything" (Lacy, 2000). Long challenged the term "Black dance" in 1989, and DeFrantz (2002) aroused concern again with the use of the term in *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African-American Dance.* He raised an interesting argument asking the questions, "What is 'Black dance'? What does it have to do with race? Is it different from African American dance? Why call it 'Black dance'? Is this term only used in the United States to segregate? What is black dance? Dance created by Black people? Why not speak of dance with an African American aesthetic?" (p. 4).

During the 1960s, African-American artists such as Alvin Ailey, Talley Beatty, and Donald McKayle created choreographic works that dramatized the shared memories, experiences, and aesthetic values of African-American people (Daly, 2002). These dances and their characteristic performance styles became known as "Black dance." Dance critics realized that an undocumented dimension of dance performance existed that grew out of New World religious practices and the contemporary experiences of the African-American people. This dance did not develop in the concert halls and dance studios, but began on the slave ships, plantations, and the streets.

Dixon Gottschild (2003) interviewed twenty-four professional choreographers on their perceptions of the meaning of Black dance in *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool.* In the interview, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar describes Black dance as "a rainbow... black dance is everything we are...all shapes, all sizes" (Dixon Gottschild, 2003a, p. 91). Zollar refers to "a black dance aesthetic shaped by black culture" (p. 98).

Dancer Gus Solomons identifies an attitude that defines what Black dance is - "one of risk and daring, emotionally and or physically" (Dixon Gottschold, 2003a, p. 36). Solomons describes the quality as "a kind of hyper energy...those legs had power behind them...when Black dancers move...they take advantage of those strong connections in their bodies so they can be reckless in a way that White dancers can't be" (p. 31). Bebe Miller also comments on "a particular fierceness...a force behind them...that is sort of proving itself" (p. 49). New York dance critic, Joan Acocella commented, "They dance like their lives depend upon it" (p. 31).

Although the artists interviewed in her study find there is a difference between the way Black and White dancers move, Dixon Gottschild (2003a) states:

> Here we are, living in the twenty-first century, talking about Black dance and Black dancers! What are we really talking about? A prejudice? A stereotype? An ideal? A limitation? And if I speak of Black dance and a Black dancing body, then is there also a White dancing body, an Asian dancing body, and so on? How and what differentiates these separate bodies? Who has the final word on what it is they do? Who is studying

> them? Where? And to what end? There is no 'Black race' or 'White race,' 'Black dance' or 'White dance.' (p.6)

DeFrantz (2001) noted that research in dance history had taken a cultural and political turn in the foreword "Black Bodies Dancing Black Culture – Black Atlantic Transformations" to Fischer-Hornung and Goeller's (2001) *Embodying Liberation: The Black Body in American Dance.* DeFrantz suggests that "we are asked to consider dancing Black bodies as agents of social change, as case studies of identities in formation, and as avatars of ethnically-inflected artistic expression....But do dancing Black bodies dance Black?" (p. 11).

Dixon Gottschild (1996) explored the presence of Africanist components in European-American performance idioms, including dance in *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts.* She claims, "The Africanist presence in American culture has shaped a New World legacy that sets American culture apart from that of Western Europe" (p.1). From modern dance matriarch Martha Graham, to postmodern dancer Trisha Brown, to jazz dancer Billy Siegenfeld, to danseur George Balanchine and his Americanization of ballet, European-American dancers have borrowed from the rich tradition and elements of African dance (Dixon Gottschild, 1996).

Summary

The resources above provide the basis for understanding the importance of dance to Africans as a means of communication, expression, identity, and spirituality. The embodied knowledge of the ancestral past could not be erased by slavery. To dance was to become transformed; to dance was to be free. Dance remained an integral part of life and the creation of culture for African Americans in the New World.

Social, cultural, political, economic and historical events in the United States shaped the medium of dance as a vehicle for the expression of the injustices and discrimination suffered by African Americans. Despite discriminatory practices in the United States, African-American artists were able to give voice to, validate, and make sense of life experience through the medium of dance. Dance has not only helped to define history but has been a catalyst to change conditions in society by breaking down barriers of race and gender. Through the medium of dance, African-American choreographers have been able to tell their stories and in some instances effect change in society. Although the battle is far from over, great strides have been by made through the efforts of African-American choreographers, who have written the past and are rewriting the future through the medium of dance.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This study looks at the reasons why some African-American choreographers create dance; what they have created and continue to create it about; and the process they use to create it. It also reveals how the dance experience has provided meaning for them and played a major role in their lives.

Research Questions

1. Why, how, and what do these African-American dancers choreograph about?
2. How does the dance experience provide meaning for them?
3. What are their perceptions of the meaning of "Black Dance"?

Methodological Approaches

This study was designed to be an interpretive qualitative study using life history. The biographical strategy (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) life history is used when conducting a narrative research (Merriam & Associates, 2002). Life history,

as a methodological approach, is used to examine the behavior of individuals or groups. This approach can provide insight into a particular culture during a particular time in history (Denzin, 1989).

Qualitative research is appropriate when "relevant variables have yet to be identified" (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 7). No prior research has been conducted on how the dance experience provides meaning for African-American professional dancers, choreographers, and dance educators. Qualitative research seeks to understand the meaning of an experience, focusing on the essence of the phenomenon (Thomas & Nelson, 2001). As the researcher, I am attempting to explain how the professional African-American dancers, choreographers, and dance educators selected for this study perceive the medium of dance as a form of expression and as a way to make meaning in their lives. A qualitative approach using life history is being used to answer the research questions because it is believed that "people make meaning of their lived experiences by narrating those experiences" (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 297).

Life history is a narrative methodology used in qualitative research using first-person accounts of experiences or stories as data. The interpretive approach attempts "to capture and represent the voices, emotions, and actions of those studied" (Denzin, 2001, p. 1). A life history methodology gives voice to the stories of these African-American artists while examining how these individuals employ the medium of dance as their voice to tell their stories. Storytelling is a way to

create personal meaning in our lives and is a powerful tool for others to understand the culture, beliefs, and history of a group of people (Merriam & Associates, 2002). Stories are a way to pass down cultural traditions and have the power to create change in society (Josselson & Lieblich, 1999).

Narrative research, because it uses personal stories as data, is much like the African tradition of storytelling through dance. Life history is the telling of life stories from the perspective of the subject. The beauty of life history is the ability to capture the words, stories, and emotions of these experiences as only the participant can tell them. "Stories are powerful tools for understanding" (Merriam & Associates, 2002, p. 286). "The goal of narrative research is not the objective truth found in the natural sciences, but a truth of disclosure found in the rich tradition of art and the humanities" (Huttunen, 1998, p. 1). "Narrative research is a hermeneutic mode of inquiry, where the process of inquiry flows from the question - which is a question about a person's inner, subjective reality, and how a person makes meaning of some aspect of his or her experience" (Josselson & Lieblich, 1999, p. x). The interview is not an objective situation, but influenced by many variables. The questions are prepared by the researcher and posed to the interview subjects, who are selected by the researcher. The analysis of the interview is subject to the interpretation of the researcher, based upon his or her personal framework (Josselson, Lieblich, & McAdams, 2003, p. 270).

The data do not stand alone in narrative research. The analysis of narrative

data can lead to new understandings or implications. Exploring one person's life history can be representative of a larger group's values. "People's narratives reflect not only their meaning-making but the themes of the society or culture in which they live" (Josselson, Lieblich, & McAdams, 2003, p. 8). The telling of stories is an important component of a qualitative study because stories are a way to make meaning, and "qualitative research is a form of systematic empirical inquiry into meaning" (Shank, 1994, p. 341). Stories play an integral role in our lives in helping us understand who we are and our identity situated within our culture (Shank, 2002). The researcher in retelling the stories of the respondents becomes the storyteller. "We do not find stories but make them" (Mischler, 1995, p. 117).

The researcher needs to interpret what is not said, read beyond the words on the surface, and place stories in different contexts. The purpose of narrative analysis is not to impose interpretations or challenge the meanings participants attach to their stories, but to determine what good might come from the analysis. "When we listen carefully to the stories people tell, we learn how people make sense of their experiences and construct meanings and selves" (Chase, 2003, p. 80).

Data Collection Strategy

The primary data collection strategy used was the oral interview. Each participant, as a professional dancer, choreographer, or dance educator, was interviewed about the meaning of the dance experience for him or her. The

participants were aware that the data obtained from the interviews would serve to enhance the literature on African Americans in dance. They agreed to participate in the study based on the knowledge that their perceptions on the meaning of dance would be published and their names would be used.

A qualitative methodology using the oral interview was the best approach for this study because it allowed the participants to tell their stories and reflect on the role dance and choreography has played in their lives. The qualitative interview was both flexible and emergent in that it provided the opportunity for an in-depth, open-ended discussion that allowed the participants to answer the questions posed after reflecting on their own personal experiences. This strategy is effective in that it reveals additional topics for the researcher to explore (Charmaz, 2002).

I employed an interviewing process that was an open-ended, yet focused process consisting of loosely designed questions. This process prompted the participants to give detailed information about their dance choreography and provided open-ended narratives about themselves, their perceptions, and other related accounts they wished to share (Denzin, 1989). As the researcher and the primary data collection instrument, I was aware of how my own perceptions on the meaning of the dance experience might influence this study. "A qualitative researcher systematically reflects on who he or she is in the inquiry and is sensitive to his or her personal biography and how it shapes the study" (Creswell, 2003, p. 182).

The interview is not an objective situation (Seidman, 1991) but determined by many factors, one being the characteristics of the interviewer (race, class, ethnicity, gender, status, and age). I employed a feminist-based interviewing technique in which the interviews were conducted conversationally, with the interviewer and interviewees as co-equals conversing about mutually relevant issues (Fontana & Frey, 2003). Feminist-based interviewing "requires openness, emotional engagement, and the development of a potentially long-term, trusting relationship between the interviewer and the subject" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p.48). Seidman (1991) describes the relationship established through the interview process as one of reciprocity between the interviewer and the interviewee as opposed to the interviewee being an object. As a dancer, I was not only sincerely interested in the stories of the participants but felt that I had actually established the beginning of many lasting friendships by listening to the stories they told. In order to obtain the greatest breadth of data, it was important to make the interviewee comfortable and feel free to add additional insight to the interview questions. Adhering to the guidelines set forth by Denzin and Lincoln (2003), as the researcher I maintained a conversational tone of "friendly chat" while following the question format.

All of the participants in this study are professional dancers, choreographers, and educators. For that reason, it was imperative that I be informed about their work prior to conducting the interview. I was also aware of the privilege to be

interviewing these very distinctive artists. When conducting elite interviews (e.g., professional dancers and choreographers), it is important to follow certain guidelines. Elite interviews (e.g., the participants of this study) are characterized by the following: 1) the interviewee is known to have participated in a certain situation; 2) the researcher reviews necessary information to arrive at a provisional analysis; 3) the production of the interview guide is based on this analysis; and 4) the result of the interview is the interviewee's definition of the situation (Dexter, 1970). Respect, mutuality, and trust must co-exist in order to avoid alienating elites (Kezar, 2003).

The participants were guided through the interview with a series of questions intended to allow them to reflect on their dance experiences and the meaning of their choreography. The interview protocol is referenced in Appendix C. The interviews were semi structured with predetermined questions modified to suit each individual's distinction and not to detract from the spontaneity of the situation. The researcher allowed each subject to answer the questions thoughtfully and as completely as the interviewee desired. The subjects responded to certain questions more exuberantly than others. The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed, and the participants were given copies of their individual transcripts to ensure accuracy of the interview proceedings and to make any additions or deletions to the transcription.

The interviews were arranged to accommodate each participant's schedule and geographic location. Locales varied from offices to dance conventions to coffee houses to the outdoors. Each situation was tailored to the subject in order to ensure a level of comfort and trust with the researcher. The interviews took place in person in an informal setting and in some cases involved follow-up interviews in person, by mail, e-mail or telephone. To prepare for the interviews, I investigated the background of each subject and attended performances choreographed by the participants to become more familiar with their work. I also attended workshops, classes and dance conventions to observe the subjects' teaching styles.

The participants were given the university-approved consent form (Appendix A) to read and sign prior to the interview. The participants of the study were aware that they would be tape recorded and that they would not remain anonymous, as their names would be used in the data collection, findings and discussion. They agreed to be quoted and named in all published and unpublished research papers. It is imperative to the nature of this study and the purpose of adding to the literature on the contributions of African Americans in dance that the names of the participants be used. Unlike traditional research findings that report subjects by their last name, I will identify the individuals in this study on a first-name basis. The rapport I established with each of the participants and the respect I have for them is the rationale behind my referring to each individual on a first-name

basis throughout the study. Because of my relationship with each person, I found it insensitive and inappropriate to refer to the participants by their last names.

The Participants

The convenient sample consisted of twelve African-American dancers, choreographers and dance educators who have made a professional career of performing, choreographing or teaching dance for twenty years or more. Eight of the performers and choreographers (Gary Abbott, Germaul Barnes, Randy Duncan, Pierre Lockett, Dianne Maroney-Grigsby, Kirby Reed, Mel Tomlinson, and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar) had previously or were currently working for well-known professional dance companies. Of these eight, four are the artistic directors of their own dance companies. These individuals have college degrees and frequently teach as guest artists at universities, conventions and dance conferences. Of these individuals, Dianne is currently a full-time professor of dance at Grambling State University, an Historically Black University; Jawole has tenure status at Florida State University; and Mel has been on faculty at University of North Carolina, Boston Conservatory, Harvard University, and North Carolina School of the Arts.

The dance educators or dance professors (Iantha Tucker, Joan Hamby Burroughs, Peter Fields, and Charles Carter) had all achieved terminal degree status and were currently teaching at universities, three at Historically Black Universities. Prior to achieving tenure status at their respective universities, these dance educators

had also performed, but in less well-known dance companies than the eight performing artists. All of these individuals consider themselves to be dancers, choreographers, and educators. Some have created works for educational purposes and student dance concerts, whereas others have created artistic works for professional dance companies.

The demographics of the participants include both male (eight) and female (four) dancers, choreographers and dance educators between the ages of 30 and 70 years of age who identify themselves as being African American. While it was not my purpose to compare the perceptions of male choreographers to female choreographers, it appears that more African-American males were teaching at the conventions I attended. That may account for the majority of males in my study (eight males and four females). But that is another area for investigation. Of the fifteen individuals asked to participate in the study, only twelve of the participants complied. Of the three who did not participate, one person who began the study would not consent to being tape recorded during the interview and asked to withdraw from the study after receiving follow-up questions by e-mail. The remaining two potential participants chose not to be involved in the study.

What may be of particular interest in this study is that several of the dancers have trained with the same teachers or performed with the same dance companies (Appendix B). I was not aware of these connections prior to the interviews. Gary and Germaul studied and danced with the Cleo Parker Robinson Dance Ensemble.

Mel and Pierre both trained and performed with Dance Theatre of Harlem. Dianne and Mel both danced with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Many of the dancers studied at the Ailey School, although not necessarily with Ailey himself (Randy, Peter, Iantha, and Charles). Katherine Dunham influenced many of the participants but appears to have played a major role particularly in the careers of Joan, Germaul, and Gary. In several cases, the participants had studied dance with two of the subjects in this study. Dianne studied with Mel while a student at Ailey, and Germaul studied with Jawole while at Cleo's. When Randy choreographed for the Joffrey Ballet, Pierre performed in two of his ballets, *A Tri-Fling* and *Copland Motets*.

All of the participants in this study are professional dancers, choreographers, and educators. For that reason, it was imperative that I be informed about their work prior to conducting the interview. I was also aware of the privilege to be interviewing these very distinctive artists. Mel Tomlinson danced with Dance Theatre of Harlem (DTH), New York City Ballet (NYCB), and the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater (AADT). Dianne Maroney-Grigsby danced for Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Randy Duncan danced for the Joseph Holmes Dance Theatre and is a world-renown choreographer and dance educator. Gary Abbott is associate director for the Chicago-based dance company Deeply Rooted Dance Theater and danced with Cleo Parker Robinson Dance Ensemble and Lula Washington. Germaul Barnes danced with the Bill T. Jones Dance Company, Cleo

Parker Robinson Dance Ensemble, was assistant to Katherine Dunham, and is the director of his company, Viewsic Expressions. Pierre Lockett danced with Dance Theatre of Harlem, Princeton Ballet, the Joffrey Ballet, and is currently the Joffrey's director for the educational outreach program. Jawole danced with Dianne McIntyre and is the founder and director of the New York-based modern dance company Urban Bush Women (UBW). Kirby Reed has danced with and choreographed for the Joel Hall Dance Company and is founder of Ascension Dance Company.

Table 1. locates several identifying factors germane to the background of these artists: highest level of education, when they started dance, how they started dance, primary dance training, and date of birth.

Data Analysis

Initially, after transcribing the interviews, I began the process of coding and looking for recurring themes within each interview. After transcribing the first interview, with Germaul Barnes, I coded the transcript looking for recurring words and initial categories were framed by the interview questions. I noted what I perceived as being highlights of each respondent's life, thus generating categories. Data collection and analysis occurred concurrently, as the initial categories were expanded, redefined, and supplemented with new categories.

Table 1.

Participants of the Study

Date of Interview	Name	Highest Level of Education	When They Started Dance	How They Started Dance	Primary Training	Date of Birth
4-03-04	Joan Hamby Burroughs	Ph.D. NYU	High school	majorette	Katherine Dunham	1935
4-03-04	Iantha Tucker	Ph.D. NYU	4 yrs. old	Dance class	Ailey School	1939
4-03-04	Germaul Barnes	BA – University of the Arts, PA	High school	Social dance	Cleo Parker Robinson	1971
4-03-04	Mel Tomlinson	Ph.D.- Carolina University of Theology	17 yrs. old Gymnastics	High school	Dance Theatre of Harlem	1954
5-13-04	Jawole Zollar	MA FSU	7 yrs. old	Musicals	Katherine Dunham	1950
4-09-05	Peter Fields	Ph.D. Union Institute	High school Church choir	Marching band	Ailey School	1957

(continued on following page)

Table 1. (continued)

Participants of the Study

Date of Interview	Name	Highest Level of Education	When They Started Dance	How They Started Dance	Primary Training	Date of Birth
4-11-05	**Dianne Maroney-Grigsby**	MA Louisiana Tech			Ailey School	1951
7-07-05	**Randy Duncan**	BA ISU	12 yrs. old	All-City Production *West Side Story*	Joseph Holmes Ailey School	1958
12-16-05	**Gary Abbott**	California School of the Arts	19 yrs. old	African dance Atlanta Dance Theater	Cleo Parker Robinson	1956
12-19-05	**Kirby Reed**	Chicago State University	25 yrs. old	Social dance	Joel Hall	1961
1-19-06	**Pierre Lockett**	University of Montevallo, AL	18 yrs. old	High school dance group	Dance Theatre of Harlem	1960
3-07-06	**Charles Carter**	Ed.D. West Virginia State	High school	Musicals	Katherine Dunham	1952

Using the constant comparison method (Charmaz, 2002; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), I developed categories and looked for emerging themes between the interviews of the twelve participants. As I transcribed and coded each successive interview, I developed new codes and categories that emerged into new themes. These themes were continuously expanded or collapsed to achieve the resulting themes. Each interview was compared with the other interviews to look for commonalities in occurrences between them. The constant comparative method allows the researcher to develop categories, themes, and tentative hypotheses by comparing the data continuously as it is analyzed (Merriam & Associates, 2002). To enhance the validity of my findings, I provided the participants with transcripts of their interviews to ensure accuracy. The chair of my committee, as well as several faculty members in my department, reviewed the themes and categories that emerged from the data.

I continued to expand and collapse my themes until I felt I had reached the point of saturation, or perhaps it was frustration. And then a revelation transpired. Due to the richness of each interview, I needed to do more than dissect each transcript and arrange them into neat little boxes. I had to think outside of the box. What began as a basic qualitative research study shifted to a life history study. The stories of each individual needed to be told. The reason I was having so much difficulty categorizing the data was because each interview was so steeped with information that it could not simply be summarized. These stories needed to be told

in the actual words of the individuals. The life histories of the African-American dancers, choreographers, and educators in this study were a source of enlightenment that needed to be shared.

My study became a narrative analysis of the life histories of the twelve individuals I interviewed. Narrative analysis, a technique of transforming informal narratives into more formal descriptions, includes analytical strategies like coding (Shank, 2002). The data in narrative research "may be used for the comparison among groups, to learn about a social phenomenon or historical period, or to explore a personality" (Lieblich et al., 1998, pp. 2-3). My interpretive approach was grounded in the realization that "a life is an unfolding production, marked by critical turning point experiences...which build on one another and become part of the person's biography" (Denzin, 1989, p.198). This approach is appropriate because it maintains that "lives are lived in the present" (Denzin, 1989, p. 199) and dance is a lived experience existing only in the moment (Sheets, 1967).

Denzin's (1989) nine-step method served as the model to organize and synthesize the life history reports. The interpretive formats of Sarte, Thompson, Denzin, and Dolby-Stahl provided the basis for the strategy I employed to analyze the life stories (Denzin, 1989). Applying Sarte's progressive-regressive method, I looked for pivotal events in each individual's life and worked forward and backward from that event. Using oral historian Thompson's method of investigation which involves collecting life stories of individuals with the same career, I investigated the

life stories of twelve individuals who were all dancers (as well as choreographers and educators). Employing Dolby-Stahl's folkloristic approach, I identified the salient themes in each subject's life. My approach to writing each narrative developed from the integration of the above-mentioned approaches to the analysis of the data (Denzin, 1989).

As the researcher, I am attempting to do more than relate the stories the participants tell. It is my responsibility to interpret what they say through my description of their experience. Every description involves a choice which is also a form of interpretation and may be influenced by the social constructs of race, class, and gender (Shank, 2002). The stories these individuals have shared and my interpretation of them provide the basis for my findings.

Introduction to Life Histories

The interviews were the highlight of my research. Through this process, I came to know and understand the important role dance has played in the lives of the individuals in this study. I also feel I have made some new friends and acquaintances in the dance world. My association with some of the interviewees was of a more personal nature than others, keeping contact by e-mail or seeing them at dance concerts and conventions. Several of the participants I knew from my participation at the Black College Dance Exchange, which I had attended for six years prior to beginning my research and have continued to attend since. It was in

fact because of this association that I became interested in the reasons why African-American artists choreograph and what the experience means to them. Although I had only made a brief acquaintance with others, introducing myself to them at dance performances or conventions, after engaging in the interview process I felt as though I had known these individuals for most of my life.

The interviews revealed how they became dancers, the struggles they made, and important influences in their lives. Each story was insightful, thought provoking, and entertaining. The richness of each narrative created a conflict for me to limit my findings to neatly compartmentalized categories and themes. I was in constant negotiation with myself trying to determine how to organize the data. I wanted the world to know the stories of these individuals and appreciate their experiences as I had. Because of the sumptuousness of each life history, I found it integral to the findings of my study to include the life history of each participant.

The life histories contained the data used to create the resulting categories for analysis. Although each life history stands on its own merit, the subjects have been grouped thematically into the following categories: Dance as Description, Dance as Educational Discourse, and Dance as Prescription. It is important to note that while the subjects have been placed in one of the three categories of analysis, they may well cross over into another category. The analysis is based on the choreographic works the subjects chose to relate in their stories; the life histories of the subjects have been arranged according to predominant themes in their work or

philosophy and have been divided into thematic chapters accordingly. The dances identified in this study represent a sample of the numerous works these artists have created.

The first category, Dance as Description, contains choreography to tell stories, express emotions, describe life experience, and entertain. This section looks at the life histories of Randy Duncan, Kirby Reed, Mel Tomlinson and Pierre Lockett. The category, Dance as Educational Discourse, includes choreography that was used to communicate, create a forum for discussion, and educate. This section embodies the life histories of Joan Burroughs, Iantha Tucker, Dianne Maroney-Grigsby, and Peter Fields. The category, Dance as Prescription, includes choreography that not only created awareness of social issues but looked to effect change in society. This section is an account of the life histories of Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, Charles Carter, Gary Abbott, and Germaul Barnes.

Although the life histories contain data used to examine the three areas of investigation, the results are subject to multiple frames of analyses. The choreographic act is as elusive as the qualitative process, there is no one set method, design or interpretation. The individuals in this study do not merely employ one process or motivation when choreographing. The complexity of the analysis is complicated by the fact that the subjects' processes and products, cross over into other categories, making it difficult to separate them.

CHAPTER 4

DANCE AS DESCRIPTION

Dance as Description is one way choreographers use to tell a story or make a statement. In African culture, the oral tradition of storytelling was a way to hand down information from one generation to the next. Many of the participants interviewed employ the African tradition of story telling to hand down life stories through the movements of dance. Randy Duncan likes to tell a story in his work because he believes it makes sense to the audience. While Kirby Reed doesn't necessarily believe all dance needs to be story-based, it does need to make sense. Mel Tomlinson believes that dance is life and a reflection of the times. He finds that through dance, we can look at a history of the people by watching it onstage. Pierre Lockett feels that it is important for the choreography to say something and make a statement. Choreographers Randy Duncan, Kirby Reed, Mel Tomlinson, and Pierre Lockett believe it is important to have a message in their work and create dance with the intention that it will have meaning and impact the audience in some way, whether they are inspired or simply entertained by the dance.

Randy Duncan

Background

Randy Duncan, former director of the Joseph Holmes Dance Theatre from (1986-1993), began his professional career with the Joseph Holmes Dance Theatre in Chicago, in 1974, when he was just 15 years old. Randy is the three time recipient of the Ruth Page Award for Choreography in 1988, 1990, 1992. He was awarded the Jazz Dance World Congress Award in 1994; the Chicago National Association of Dance Masters Artistic Achievement Award in 1999; and the Black Theatre Alliance/Ira Aldridge Award for Best Choreography-Contemporary in 1999.

Early Dreams

Randy's early dreams of dance began as a child when he would watch the musicals and beautiful variety shows on television. He enjoyed living vicariously outside his own little world, working hard to make his dreams become a reality. Randy persisted in his attempt to accomplish the amazing feats of the acrobats and contortionists on television and with practice, he soon found himself able to master these very tricks.

> I have always been a person who enjoyed dance, as well as singing, all of the theatrics. I loved watching Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, and Gene Kelly. And the beautiful variety shows, Carol Burnett and Friends, and Donny Osmond, growing up. And some of...Ed, what's his name, the Ed

> Sullivan Show...And anything with magic, Bewitched, I Dream of Jeannie. All of these things that you couldn't clearly touch, you know outside our realistic world. My favorite show was Bozo's Circus and during the half-time, they would put on as entertainment...acrobatics or jugglers or magicians...The most interest I had was the acrobats....So, I'd watch the acrobats and I'd try everything they did. I thought I was a contortionist. I wanted to be a contortionist. So I'd do the backbend and try to stick my head through my legs and all, and get up on the chairs, the two chairs and bend back and try to pick up the glass of water and drink it, I mean everyday. What really fascinated me was to see them go into a split. Oh, my God. That's incredible. How do they do that?

Preparing to Succeed

Randy knew that his dreams would not be realized without hard work. At such a young age, he already possessed the determination and discipline that was going to make him successful. Randy had mastered the acrobatic skills of the backbend and split, he had a good sense of his body, and an awareness of how to lengthen everything.

> I started stretching my legs everyday so I could learn how to do a split. To help me out even further, I'd watch Lilia's Yoga and You on PBS, cause she gave you the yoga thing where she could split and take her leg behind her head. Before you know it, it was about a month, I believe I was in the seventh grade at the time. I was stretching my legs everyday for a month and finally, I got the split! It was just a marvel, because for a boy, what was it in the seventies, doing the split, it was almost unheard of, especially in my community. So, I had that under my belt.

Randy's keen eye for detail enabled him to absorb the subtleties of movement, from the grace and form of the Olympic gymnasts to the contortionists on Bozo's Circus; everything he learned was from watching it on television. But

the real turning point in his life was the movie West Side Story, when Randy became aware of a whole new world of possibilities that could be his through dance.

> It wasn't until I saw West Side Story, did I really become fully aware of what dance could do or where it could put you. I was always interested in musical theatre. As I said before, so I watched the show and I was hooked. I knew that's what I wanted to do.

Pursuing a Dream

A year later Randy got the chance to fulfill his dream. Auditions were being held for the Chicago all-city high school production of West Side Story. Although he was only twelve years old and still in the eighth grade, Randy went to the audition.

> They said they needed acrobats as well as dancers, singers, musicians, etc. So, you know, there's like a thousand people down there auditioning for the show. I was there in this group of guys to go up and audition, and I went up.
>
> There were about ten of us. The choreographer showed us something, we did it and we sat back down. I didn't think I did so well...you know, cause I saw a lot of people there who had classes and things like that. I never had a dance class before. Everything I learned was from Bozo's Circus.

Randy's adoration was obviously a mutual one as he was chosen to be a "shark" after displaying his acrobatic skills to the judges. The choreographer, Geraldine Johnson offered Randy a scholarship to study dance with her at the Sammy Dyer School of Theater. While in rehearsals for the musical, he began

taking dance classes in ballet, modern and acrobatics and soon Randy was even teaching acrobatics.

> Well, they had a director, they had a choreographer, and they had a musical director...like the finest in their field! I got up on that little stage and did my little walkovers and backovers and split [he laughs]. You know, everything that I knew...and everybody applauded. It's all because of her [Geraldine Johnson] that I'm here.

Randy had the good fortune to audition for and make the all-city production of *West Side Story*, when he was in eighth grade. It was not only an amazing experience, but gave him the chance to work with students from other schools with different ethnic backgrounds. Randy enjoyed the opportunity to work with this group of young talented people who shared the common interest of musical theater and dance.

> This was my first time, mind you, being among Hispanics and whites and Asians. This was the first time in my life that all of us were together. So it was really unreal and I was like, wow, being downtown with all the high schools. This was amazing and I just loved the atmosphere, it was great. They would take the best students from all the schools and put them in the shows.

A Passion for Dance

His involvement in the annual all-city high school musicals reinforced his love of dance. After studying with Geraldine Johnson, Randy continued to strengthen his background in dance by attending the Chicago Academy of the Performing Arts High School and studying with the Joseph Holmes Dance Theatre.

After working in New York, Joseph Holmes had returned to Chicago with the desire of establishing his own company on the south side of the city.

> I met Joseph Holmes in the subway and he said come on out. So I went there and I saw them doing this class in Graham technique. I knew nothing about Graham, about the Martha Graham technique. I just thought it was spell bounding the way this group of dancers were moving, and I thought, oh my gosh! I started training with him and the next thing, you know, do you want to be in the company? So, that's how I started.

Randy studied Horton, Dunham and Graham techniques with Joseph Holmes; Dunham with Lester Goodman, co-founder of Joseph Holmes Dance Theatre; and ballet with Harriet Ross. He continued to train, going to New York to take classes at the Alvin Ailey American Dance Center, and with Pearl Lang, Bertram Ross, Pepsi Bethel, and Pat Thomas. Randy recalled Alvin Ailey coming to the Chicago studio to audition dancers for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

> He was very good friends with Joseph Holmes... I have dancers that I have trained that are now in Ailey's company. When Joseph Holmes began his company in 1974, he took anybody and everybody who could move and was interested in a professional career in dance. His strong passion for movement and desire to create a company of mixed races, much like Ailey, but based on the Graham technique, was the essence of JHDT. There wasn't a whole lot written about him because his life, here in Chicago, was so short...from '74-'86.

Dance has played a monumental role in Randy's life. Like his mentor Joseph, Randy spoke about having a passion for dancing. "When I was doing

it, I was well into it. I was passionate about it."

Role Models

Randy professed feelings of admiration for Harriet Ross, former associate artistic director of JHDT, whom he described as "a fabulous prodigy of dance, just an incredible teacher and coach...who really whipped the company into shape." He credited her as being his greatest influence in dance, on his choreography, and in life. Harriet continues to influence his life as Randy's manager.

> She really is the major influence on me as an artist, I would say more than anyone else, because of her knowledge.... She knows how to pull things out of people that you didn't even think they had.... So I've learned a lot from her... She can teach you anything, as far as dance is concerned. She can really do it. She has an understanding of what should be happening here.

His Career Takes Off

Working with the Joseph Holmes Dance Theatre was just the beginning of a career in dance, for Randy, that would sky-rocket. Randy has created critically acclaimed works for the Chicago-based dance companies: the Joffrey Ballet, River North Dance Company and Gus Giordano Jazz Dance Chicago. Nationally and internationally, he has choreographed for the Atlanta Ballet, Spectrum Dance Theater, and the Bat Dor Dance Company in Tel Aviv, Israel. Since 1995, Randy has donated his time to create the all-company finale at the annual Dance for Life

benefit, when he choreographed Lean on Me. His choreography has also appeared in the film *Save the Last Dance* and in numerous musicals.

I have admired Randy Duncan's choreography since I first experienced *Inside Your Heart at* a Dance for Life benefit in 1997. From that moment on, I made a point of seeking out his work within the Chicago dance circuit. The first time I actually met Randy was at a Dance for Life benefit where I introduced myself and asked if he would consider doing an interview for a research article. He flashed his smile and said, "Call me, I'm in the book, under Duncan." I was very excited at the prospect of speaking with him again. Although I had not yet set a date for an interview, I continued to see Randy at the dance concerts where his works were being performed. He was always friendly and I continued to remind him that one day, I would like to set a date for an interview.

To my delight, Randy began teaching at the Chicago National Association of Dance Masters, which I regularly attend. He also teaches for the Chicago Dance Connection, the Black College Dance Exchange, and Jazz Dance World Congress. Now, I not only had a chance to see his choreography but observe his teaching techniques and the way he combined dance combinations. I followed him around like a groupie, completely drawn to this man, his talent, and his gentle soul. Randy inspired me with his selection of music and choreography to expand my own style of teaching. It was no coincidence that Randy Duncan would be involved in my research project.

I interviewed Randy on July 7, 2005 after he taught a jazz class for the Chicago Dance Connection at the Hyatt Regency, Woodfield. I asked where he might like to have lunch and he suggested Fuddruckers. He chose a round-shaped booth called The King, surrounded by photographs and memorabilia of Elvis Presley. Although it was relatively noisy because of the lunchtime crowd, Randy remained aware of the tape recorder and spoke directly into it.

Encouraging Students

We were talking about the modern class he had just taught and Randy expressed his love of teaching and concern for the students. Randy is, indeed, a master teacher who strives to bring out the best in his students, encouraging them every dance step of the way.

> It's really important that they understand the concepts and the techniques and how to utilize the technique to make their movement much better. So, that's why I enjoy doing this. I really, really love being out there. And if they have that passion and technique to match it, they would really go somewhere and be doing something.

I commented on how students are often afraid of making a mistake or looking foolish in class. Randy understood my concern and explained how he tries to teach to all levels within the class and make it a meaningful experience for everyone.

Well, that's why I try to make them as comfortable as possible...to give them that comfort level, and let them know, so what if you fall. That's all right, just get back up and do it again. They have to understand that you're there for them. ...It's really about them. That's old school when they talk about teachers coming out with a whip and a stick (chuckle) and screaming and yelling. There's really no reason for that.

Randy adopts a non-judgmental approach when teaching students. "I try to make them feel as comfortable as possible. It's all about the students. You really want to be encouraging."

> When I first start teaching class, I look at the person who is the weakest and I look at the person who is the strongest in class. Then I aim from there, where I need to take the class, to bring it to a happy medium rather than all advanced, just because I'm there and I can do the advanced classes.
>
> But I'm there for the students and that's really important to give them enough of a challenge so that they'll go for it. What is important is that I get the dancers to understand what it really means to be a dancer and for dancers to always have that goal. I do turn out an awful lot of professional dancers...and to know how to get them to that level. It's a good thing that I have an understanding of the work of ballet, modern and jazz technique. Those things are the major components.

The Universal Language

Randy spoke fervently about the role dance plays in reaching across the cultures. The concept of dance being the universal language has been refuted by some dance scholars. Through my investigation it appears, those who have traveled

internationally, performing with or choreographing for a dance company, or have a strong background in ballet or diverse training in many techniques, maintain this view. When I asked Randy his opinion, he was unwavering in the belief that dance is the universal language.

> Dance is the universal language... Because when it comes to dance, we all speak...It's about movement. It's about feeling the space, the energy, the time. It's being able to understand how dance technique can make you cross over the waters and be able to do whatever they're doing in Israel, or whatever they're doing in France, or Germany, or you know... It crosses cultures, and we are all speaking tendu. We are all speaking passé...plie. You know, we are all speaking that.... When it comes to codified technique, it is the universal language. You can express yourself through dance and not just by taking classes, but you can actually make stories... It can be done, not only in America, but in the world.

Randy's own ethnic background crosses cultures, being a descendant of American Indian, Irish, and African ancestry. This makes him very aware of the importance of not only understanding different cultures, but also maintaining the integrity of dance styles.

> I think it's important for people to understand culture and where it came from. We know dance started in Africa. All dance started in Africa. Then it moved into Europe and America. .... Well, maybe dance began in Africa, but ballet, itself, the training of that very upright aristocratic style came from Europe... and then came over to the United States... You've got the Irish jig... and all that...Which is why I jive it all together in my choreography...because it is a mixture.

When asked who he feels has been the most influential African-American

choreographer in this country, he replied without hesitation, "That would be Alvin Ailey, for his music and using Black choreographers for his repertory company."

Inspiration

When it comes to choreographing, Randy feels that he has been given a gift. He is completely inspired by life, being very aware of everything and paying close attention to detail. Randy doesn't have his dances completely worked out in advance, but he does have a beginning and an ending to let him know "where he is headed". He expressed that often the dancers play a big part in determining what will happen in the middle. Although he is inspired by the music, it is more important for him to have an idea, first.

> So that I can paint a nice picture onstage. I find that I always tell a story because...it makes sense to the audience. They're used to storytelling from as kids (chuckle). And it's good for me to know what it's all about. You know, I can tell a story without the music there. I usually tell the composer what I want, what kind of instruments I'm hearing in my head...for this particular piece, whether it's a violin or whether it's a piano or percussion...or whether it's a horn. And I say, this is what I'm thinking. Is it going to be happy or is it going to be sad? Do we want it very strong and earthy or do we want it light and airy? Those are the kind of things I give to the composer and to let him know. And then we go from there.

It's important to Randy for the audience to understand his work. They may not always get the story he was trying to convey and may have their own personal

interpretation. "As long as they come away with something and are inspired by it, and they are entertained by it, and it wasn't 'what was that?'"

> I have something to say and generally, it is not movement for movement's sake, although I can do that. It really is coming from someplace else. As long as you're telling that story the way that you want it to be seen by the audience, and that they get it. It doesn't matter the style you use as long as the message is there. What are you saying? Why deliver a message without something in the envelope?"

Outlet for Emotions

One of the strongest influences in the choreography of the African-American choreographers in this study is grief and loss. The subject of AIDS has become a familiar topic about which artists create contemporary works because of its devastating effects within the dance community, and in the African-American community, specifically. Back in the 1980s, however, AIDS was not a subject openly discussed nor was much known about this disease.

Randy summons personal feelings about death and anger utilizing them to inspire his choreography and as an emotional outlet. In his piece, *Turning Tides* (1986), Randy expresses the loss of so many talented artists to this disease and feelings of his own deep grief over the loss of a mentor, Joseph Holmes, to AIDS. Randy takes all of the emotions he was internalizing and shapes them into a powerful work of choreography in *Turning Tides.* The piece is an example of strength and truthfulness that Randy reveals by openly addressing this painful topic.

> That really has a profound message. And it's screaming, 'God save the children from the fire'...whether it's people grabbing children and sacrificing them or the fact that AIDS had become really prominent in our community, and taking that away from us, because that's what Joseph Holmes died of.

Turning Tides, with music by Sam Harris is an electrifying piece with a profound message. The lyrics scream, "God Save the children...from the fire." Randy was still dancing for the Joseph Holmes Dance Theatre and had given Joseph the music to begin choreographing, but Joseph not able to finish the piece. Randy discussed the impact Joseph's illness and death had on the dance community, while at the same time contributing to the powerfulness of the dance piece.

> He took the music and he actually started the "Storm" part, the ensemble part...he did eight measures of it or something, and then he went into the hospital. And that was...it. I was doing a piece, a solo piece, as a friend. This is my gift to you, as a friend. I was working on that...and then, he died. So I took what Joseph had already started, the eight measures that he had started...And I worked where I thought Joseph would be going with this. And I turned it into something more meaningful because of his death.
>
> It did premier on the day that he died and I was actually dancing the solo. So it has really profound meaning. We couldn't dance it for many, many months without crying and tearing, and the audience crying, and the stagehands crying, everybody...because it was so powerful.

Randy vividly recalled an emotionally empowering experience during one of his performances, while dancing with the company. Randy had finished choreographing *Turning Tides* and Randy was about to perform the opening section,

his solo, at the Auditorium Theater. As the curtain went up, the audience broke into thunderous applause, before Randy even moved.

> And the curtains went up and I was just sitting there on the floor, and there was this thunderous applause...before I even moved. It was like, oh my God... It was, like, people had seen it and they knew what was coming. So, it was a really, really wonderful thing. But I think the fact that I was doing it, you know, as the choreographer of the piece and all that....

Turning Tides is more than a tribute to the late artistic director, Joseph Holmes, it was Randy's way to speak out about the emotional devastation and sacrifice of life from the disease AIDS. Choreographed in 1986, *Turning Tides* has not only remained a powerful piece, but has become even more dynamic though out the years. The message behind *Turning Tides* is clear. Although the piece was inspired by the devastation of AIDS and the loss of life, *Turning Tides* is strong, hopeful and full of life.

Life Experiences

A three-time recipient of the Ruth Page Award for choreography, Randy's pieces often speak about human issues, inspired by real life experiences and the people he knows. Choreographic works include *Sparring Partners,* which deals with issues of homosexuality; *Love Not Me*, a solo about a girl yearning for love in her life and her struggle to find it; *Bittersweet Ave*, which exposes the Rush Street scene as men and women parade about trying to see and be seen; and *Women's*

Work, a comment on the strength of women to accomplish the work they do.

Randy draws upon a personal experience with a member in his dance company to create *Love Not Me.* The piece is about a girl who desperately wanted love in her life but couldn't find it.

> This particular solo showed all her anger and it also showed her want and her yearn for somebody to love and to care for her...her want and yearning for a baby...wanting to have that. Basically, she went crazy... because she couldn't get this, she couldn't find this. It was powerful and it was angry.

The nightlife scene on Rush Street is the setting for the piece *Bittersweet Ave.* The dance looks at people and their quest to find love.

> You know, eight, nine o'clock at night. And you've got all the folks coming in from the burbs and from the city and drinking and carrying on down there at "Mary's Bar" and outside... and everybody's there to see and be seen.

In contrast to the nightlife scene, Randy commends women and the hard work they do in *Women's Work.* His choreography reveals the strength of women performing mundane tasks, taking the drudgery of women's daily chores to show just how strong these women really are.

> Within the costume there was this rope that they used just like a belt at times. It was used as a shawl at other times. It was used as a cleaning piece...it was used as a jump rope. So there were all these things that this rope was being used for.

Artistic

Randy finds his choreography has changed through the years, becoming less presentational and more internal, with the feeling coming from the inside. Randy explained the distinction between choreography that has a message, and dance that is purely meant to be entertaining, the music playing a big part in determining that. Randy referred to his own pieces, *Aretha,* which he described as being very presentational as opposed to *Love Not Me,* which he described as being very internal, forcing the audience to look inside the dancer's soul. *"Aretha* is really presentational and out there and you can have a good time and enjoy it because of the music and the dancing that's going on."

> There's an internal soul that can be looked at... For instance, in *Love Not Me*, you're looking in on her as opposed to her trying to reach out to you for something. You're looking at this as if it were a film, but not being, 'Here I am, here I am audience' as in *Aretha,* which is very presentational and out there.

Randy tries to get his dancers in touch with their internal feelings as well during a performance. "For an audience to see that and to understand that it doesn't have to be big, it has to be engaging."

Spiritual

Randy believes it is a deep spiritual connection that inspires him while teaching a dance class or creating a choreographic work, a spiritual guidance that is

present, a force beyond his control. He feels blessed to have been given this gift and described the powerful feeling that overtakes him.

> When I'm teaching, I don't even feel like it's me. It's like something is working through my body. And it's just going. A lot of times I have no idea, when you ask me later what I said in class, because it's happening in the moment. It's really a spiritual guidance that's taking place there. I really feel that God has given me a gift to be shared...and I'm using it. I honestly feel a strong spiritual belief and connection. And it is that, that really moves me to do what I do.

When Randy choreographs, as in teaching, Randy feels that it is not him, but rather a force that overcomes him. Embedded in African culture is the belief that the artist is not the force behind the work, but "chosen" as a conduit for the stories that must be told. This belief manifests a spirituality within the artwork, embodied in the epic memory sense. It is a calling upon one's ancestors to allow the artist the ability to create (Welsh Asante, 2001).

> As a choreographer, I feel very gifted in the respect that I can do that. I know it is (embodied knowledge)...these things just come...and they need to be shared...and there're visions that I have and it happens. I feel like it's not me. I honestly feel that it is something that is working in me. The images just keep coming. It's like you turn on a faucet and the water keeps going after you turn it off. It just continues to go, and when I'm choreographing a piece, it's very difficult for me to sleep at night. Because they don't...it won't let me stop thinking about what's going on and where it's going (chuckle). That's why, even though I might come into a space and sort of have an idea of what I want....it's because I've already been thinking about it... And when I get with the people the vision becomes clearer and clearer. So, that's kind of how it works.

Whether watching a performance or participating in his dance class, Randy's

choreographic style is captivating. His strong technical dance background in ballet, modern and jazz techniques allow him to flow from one style of dance to another effortlessly and artistically. When asked how he describes his style, Randy said,

> Everything is my style (chuckle). It is a mixture of...different dance styles... integrated to make it work and flow together... Mine is the integration of jazz, modern, ballet and African dance. And it's those combinations, which make the Randy Duncan choreography.... You're going to feel a mixture of those things...There's a few little hip-hop steps, but certain hip-hop steps come from African dance, you know. But in all of the other things, you'll see that mixture.
>
> I remember Gerald Arpino, who's the artistic director of Joffrey said when he first saw my work, that was the reason why he asked me to come to New York and start working with his company. He said, I can't believe how you put all those things together, and you do it so well, and it just flows like it's a natural thing, you know.

The Dance Experience

Randy recalled that when he danced, he was passionate about performing. Today, his focus is on teaching and choreographing and sharing the gift he has been given by God.

> My days of dancing, as a performer are over. I mean, I would not want to dance now as a concert dancer. When I was doing it, I was well into it. I was passionate about it. Um, but those days are done for me. (Dance) it is my life. Ask me if I ever imagined doing anything else and I couldn't. I honestly could not. I love teaching. I love choreographing. I really feel that God has given me a gift to be shared...and I'm using it. It is that, that really moves me to do what I do. I honestly feel a strong spiritual belief and connection.

Creating a Legacy

Engaging is a good word to describe Randy, not only as a teacher and choreographer, but as a person. When I asked him what legacy or contribution he would like to leave to the dance world or how would he like people to remember Randy Duncan, I was not surprised when he answered,

> I want them to remember me as a...gentle, very kind, very...more of a person, than anything. A very fair individual...an eclectic choreographer...who had a very strong spiritual connection with God...and who had a strong connection with people and with dancers. And good looking (chuckle). And certainly, I want them to remember the work, the work that inspired them, the work that made them cry, the work that made them laugh.... And as a friend.

Randy Duncan is all that and so much more to everyone who knows him.

Summary

Randy's early dreams of becoming a dancer were soon realized when he auditioned for the all-city high school production of West Side Story. Although he never had a dance lesson, Randy had prepared himself well, stretching everyday and practicing the acrobatic tricks he saw performed on television. Randy became aware of a whole new world of possibilities that could be his through dance.

Randy began taking dance classes at the Sammy Dyer School of Theater, and continued his studies at the Chicago Academy of the Performing Arts High

School. Soon he was studying with Joseph Holmes and performing in his company. This was a very positive experience for Randy and his development as a dancer, choreographer, and teacher. When mentor Joseph Holmes passed on, Randy assumed the role of artistic director for the company. Randy credits Harriet Ross, former associate director of the Joseph Holmes Dance Theatre as being the greatest influence in his life, in dance, and on his choreography, Harriet continuing to be a major part of Randy's life, as his manager. Randy is a world-renown choreographer, producing works for major dance companies, nationally, internationally, and for film. He has even donated his time and talent to the AIDS Foundation, as the choreographer of the always anticipated finale, for the annual Dance for Life Benefit.

When choreographing, Randy usually begins with an idea, having a beginning and an ending in mind. The dancers play a role in the creative process sometimes determining what will happen in the middle. Although music may be inspiring, Randy can tell a story without the music there. This is in line with the belief in African culture that movement emanates within the dancer, as opposed to being the result of external forces. Then he may tell the composer what instruments he hears and the quality of music he is looking for to accompany his piece.

Randy describes his style as the integration of many dance styles-jazz, modern, ballet, and African dance. He is completely inspired by life and draws from his experiences for his choreography. Some of the subjects he choreographs

about deal with love, death, and homosexuality. Because Randy wants his audience to understand his work, he employs the African tradition of storytelling in his choreography because Randy believes people are used to storytelling as children. It is important to him that the audience not only enjoys but understands his work.

In addition to choreographing, Randy is a master teacher at dance conventions held nationally. As an educator, Randy believes in encouraging students by making them feel as comfortable as possible. When working with professional dancers, Randy not only challenges them technically but also tries to get them in touch with their internal feelings.

Randy feels a spiritual force overtakes him while teaching or choreographing. He describes this feeling as though something is working through his body, which is in line with the belief in African culture that the spirit calls upon the artist to be the conduit of the creative act (Welsh Asante,1996). Randy has a strong spiritual connection to God and is grateful to have been blessed with this gift he so humbly shares.

The vast range of experiences performing, choreographing, and teaching that Randy has had nationally and internationally qualify him to state, "Dance is the universal language...because when it comes to dance, it's all about movement...it crosses cultures...You can express yourself through dance...you can actually make stories...It can be done, not only in America, but in the world."

Kirby Reed

Background

Kirby Reed, Founder of Ascension/The Kirby Reed Project, began dancing at age twenty-five. Although he attended Chicago State University and the Academy of Arts with hopes of teaching graphic design, he turned to a career in banking. Inspired by seeing Vanessa Truvillion dance, Kirby began taking classes at the Joel Hall Dance Center, where Vanessa studied. This was to become a life-altering experience for Kirby.

At age thirty, Kirby quit his job as a banker to join Joel Hall Dance Theater. In addition to performing with the company and appearing in videos and motion pictures, he has choreographed for Joel Hall Dance Theater, Gus Giordano Jazz Dance Chicago, Cirque Rivera, Dallas Black Dance Theater, and Instruments of Movement.

Currently, Kirby teaches workshops for Jazz Dance World Congress and the Dance Connection and is on the faculty at Columbia College, Francis W. Parker High School, Lou Conte's, Giordano Dance Center, and the Joel Hall Dance Center. He has received two Canadian awards for his choreography and has been nominated for best choreography by the Black Theatre Alliance.

Lifesaver

Everyone comes into dance for a different reason; for Kirby Reed, it was a life-saver. At age twenty-five, he was already stressed out by a high power tension job at a bank and although the pay was good, Kirby was so unhappy he was having anxiety attacks that were threatening his health. Kirby's original dreams of becoming a graphic design teacher were crushed when budget cuts eliminated many school programs. He turned to a career in banking that lasted thirteen years too long. "I was slowly starting to die." Kirby, needing something to reduce his stress, was in search of an answer and that is when he discovered dance.

> I came into dance very late. I got started dancing when I was twenty-five. I was a banker for thirteen years, but I didn't make the transition career-wise until I was thirty. So I didn't know all this was out there and available. I had a high-power tension job, so I needed something to reduce stress and I was in search of something. A friend of mine was working out with this woman who was a dancer. I went to her concert and met Vanessa Truvillion and from then on I was hooked.

Kirby proclaimed that "he had never seen so many Black people on stage." Inspired by the performance, Kirby had aspirations of becoming a dancer. First, he went to the Joel Hall Dance Center just to observe, and then he took a class to reduce stress. Soon, once a week turned into twice a week and Kirby found himself auditioning for a scholarship, never dreaming dance would become his life and his career.

> I had never seen that many Black people on stage and I had never seen a dance concert... Then I went to watch them take class and then I would take class, like once a week to reduce stress...So once a week turned into twice a week... So one thing lead to another and eventually it lead to here... I never thought that this is what I'd be doing for a career. I don't think of it as a job because I enjoy doing what I'm doing.

A Role Model

Twenty-one years later, Kirby is still working for Joel Hall. Kirby spoke fondly of Joel Hall, the teacher and Joel Hall the man, referring to him as a "father figure." Joel Hall was the role model Kirby needed.

> He was a major mentor. Joel's really organic. He's just Joel. And you see him. The first time he's very intimidating. The first time, I was scared to talk and scared to move. I would go into the other room and I would sit and watch his class. I was just inspired by the things he would come up with...his musicality and the things he knew how to do. It's funny that I saw him more as my adult father figure, the first man in a long time in my life.

Kirby believes that Joel Hall is the perfect example of being able to form a community without regard to race or culture through dance. For Kirby, the dance experience went beyond establishing a community, it became a second family.

> He's a perfect example because there are people from all walks of life, from all ages, up there. I used to take class with a sixty-year-old man.... He would take class, this sixty-year-old Caucasian and we would hip-hop together. And that's why I'm still there, because that place and no other place that I've been to has that kind of feel. Like, you feel that, that's your family.

I first met Kirby in 1999 when one of my former students asked if he could come to Chicago State University to teach a master jazz dance class. I was impressed by his style of choreography and his likable personality. Two years later, at the 20th Anniversary Black College Dance Exchange, I saw the piece "*Snakes, Snails, and Puppy Dog's Tails*" that Kirby had choreographed for Dallas Black Dance Theater. The message of the dance was, "Boys don't dance, men do." Our paths crossed again on August 5, 2005 at Jazz Dance World Congress where Kirby was teaching a class in hip-hop. After class, I asked if he would participate in my study. He seemed willing and we exchanged contact information.

On a very cold day, December 19, 2005 we met at the Starbucks across from the Joel Hall Dance Center in Chicago. I was impressed by Kirby's punctuality as he got off his bus right on schedule to meet with me. I understood how important integrity meant to Kirby when he talked about his personal work ethic during the interview. Kirby prides himself on the importance of having a good reputation, taking nothing for granted about his life or the business.

> I'm very business-minded because you develop a reputation. So my reputation is what keeps me getting hired...How you behave working establishes your career... I have not actively had to seek a job, which has been very good. So every time I pick up the phone or get an e-mail, I thank the force. I thank the universe. I take nothing for granted that I am able to work.

Tightly Wound

Kirby always liked to dance, whether at home with his brothers and sisters, or at parties with his friends. Although he watched the movie musicals on television, Kirby never dreamed that dance could be a career.

> As a kid I used to dance for quarters, for my grandfather and my mom. On Sundays, we would clean up the house and so my sisters and brothers would entertain each other to see who knew the latest dances. That's literally how I started dancing...and parties. There were basement parties. I was the guy who knew all the dances and so all the girls would want to dance with me...Growing up as a southsider, we weren't exposed to that kind of culture. I used to watch musicals and that kind of stuff on tv, but I didn't know that they actually hired people to do stuff like that.

For Kirby, dance is a way of life. He believes that he really does not have a choice. Kirby likes the way it makes him feel mentally and spiritually, and as his only form of relaxation. Although he still has a passion for dancing, he prefers to choreograph and teach.

> When I dance, I'm still...I'm really tightly wound...like I'm really tight. I'm spending a lot of time making sure everything's... I love to rehearse, which is really a strange thing. I love rehearsal, but when it come time for the stage, which is why I stopped dancing...I would rather see somebody else perform as opposed to me. I don't like a lot of attention. And for me, like that's too much attention. I have a passion for it, but I don't just want to dance to dance.

Fantasy

Watching Kirby dance is indeed an experience. He has more moves per beat than most people can comprehend, and a style and charm to match. When Kirby dances, he is completely engaging. In addition to being a Joel Hall Dancer for eleven years, he has danced in videos for LL Cool J, Montell Jordan and Kym Simms, and appeared in the motion pictures, *Hoodlums* and *The Untouchables.* Kirby commented about the fantasy side of motion picture and television.

> That was fun, but it's so much fantasy...With television, you're working in this space, the size of this couch, with thirty dancers...They play the music...and then they turn it off and they have this thing called a thumper...and that's what you dance to...

Making Meaning

At this point in his life, Kirby prefers choreographing and teaching to performing, Kirby says that dance is a profession where people are continually judging you and picking you apart, whether in class or onstage. Although Kirby still enjoys dancing and rehearsing, he prefers being behind the scenes to the pressure of performing on stage. Choreographing didn't always come easily to Kirby, though. In the beginning, he admits he was so busy trying to please others, that he had not found his own voice.

> I was so fascinated with Joel, I was so fascinated with Vanessa, so

> fascinated with this woman named, Julie Malone, that I just wanted to embody them. I wanted to do everything that they wanted. Cause I wanted my work to look like theirs.

Dance was a life saver for Kirby, at a time when he did not know how to deal with his emotions in any other way. Kirby describes his choreography as an expression of his heart. This emanates from a time in his life when it seemed to Kirby, that everything was going wrong. Kirby used dance as an outpouring for these feelings. That was when he realized that he was a choreographer. Through his choreography, Kirby was able to tap into his dark side and purge himself of the negative feelings he was experiencing. When he finally let go, that was the point when he was able to create his own original work.

> I did this piece called, *Descent.* There was this time in my life that I was suicidal. There were so many things that were going wrong, that I was so unhappy. And I didn't know how to get it out... I wanted to do this piece... Vanessa, the woman who started me dancing, danced the piece I choreographed. Today, she can't do the piece because she knows what it means. At every rehearsal when we would finish, I would just be in tears. There was just so much going on and I didn't feel that I had anybody to talk to and...she knew something was wrong, but she couldn't figure out what was wrong. To see her do this piece, she could actually understand what I was saying without me having to verbally tell her. I think that is what connected us during that period in my life.... And being able to utilize that and be able to tap into that is when I realized that I can choreograph. I choreograph from the heart, not for recognition. I choreograph for myself and my mother and Vanessa.

For many choreographers, dance is their language, it is the best way they know how to communicate. Kirby was able to use dance as an outlet to express his

internal feelings that he had no other way of releasing. He claims the greatest influence on his choreography has been "Vanessa Truvillion and my broken heart." Kirby uses the choreographic act to cleanse his spirit. "I have issues. That's why I choreograph... It cleanses my system. It cleanses my spirit (he laughs). I feel more at peace when I choreograph."

Life Experience

The reasons people choreograph and what they choreograph about are as varied as the artists themselves. The choreographer's intent may be to tell stories, make political statements or simply to create a beautiful work of art. The artist may use the medium of dance to express emotions, communicate ideas, or share life experience. Although Kirby does not feel that dance needs to tell a story, he maintains that it should make sense. "I don't think it should all have meaning. I think it should make sense....It doesn't all have to tell a story. It doesn't have to be story based, but I think it should make sense." Where do his ideas come from? "Life, just life. Emotions. It depends on what's going on and it varies. It all depends on what's going on." Kirby uses life and personal experiences to create his dances.

> A lot of them are personal things that have happened in my life. Some of them are just things that I may think about. I did this piece called *Stereotypes* about all the stereotypes we have in the dance world. Like,

> complexion, body type... It starts off like they're in an audition and they step forward and say, 'five foot three inches, yes I have big breasts, yes, I'm a Latino woman,' or something like that.
>
> That was when I was in a point in time when I was noticing where almost every company I saw...there'd be one Black woman, maybe one Black man, maybe one Latino that could pass for Black or white. I was like, this is really weird. As big as this venue is that the only time there were people of color on stage, was for Joel. And this was for a month of dance. I thought this doesn't make any sense at all, and so that kind of bothered me. I would hear dancers talk about their experiences going to auditions....and so that got me thinking.

Kirby also uses his choreography to express personal feelings about death and grief. Kirby struggled with feelings of loss over the death of his brother, but because he was on a tight performance schedule at the time, he was unable to go through the natural grieving process. Not having the chance to grieve for his brother, he took all of the emotions that he had internalized and expressed them in his piece, *Forty Dollars.* It was important for Kirby to be able to find closure through this choreographic work.

> So a lot of things are just like, I just recently lost my brother...are about things that happen. As I was traveling a lot, I didn't have a chance to process it or flush it. So just recently, this year, I got the chance to do this piece for my brother. I called it "Forty Dollars" because from my house to the hospital, the cab ride would cost me exactly forty dollars to get there. It's one of the pieces that really means a lot to me. Once they finished the piece, it was a release. I got a chance to grieve and so it helped me a lot.

Kirby uses life and emotions to choreograph. He has also used feelings of betrayal as a topic for his choreography. In *Lies in a Bow*, Kirby creates a picture of deception based on a personal experience.

> Like a pretty bow. It's about how people who lie, and how lies are so beautiful and so beautifully wrapped. It was about this relationship that I was going through, and the person happened to be a constant liar. The lies were deceiving because they were so pretty to look at. Originally when I set it, the women all had on corsets and lace, and so they were all alike. They were all so pretty and made up, but their intentions were all so vicious. People would gossip and rumors circulate, and lies build and build...and they explode.

The Human Spirit

Kirby has also choreographed religious works. The one of which he spoke was for the Silver Anniversary Celebration in Texas for Bishop Jakes, inspired by the events of September 11, 2001. Following the terrorist attacks, as part of World Prayer Day in Texas, Kirby's company, The Ascension Group Project, performed *The Alabaster Box.* The piece choreographed was designed as a way to comfort people.

> The number I created was to Cece Winan, called *The Alabaster Box.* It's about the box that Mary carried with water for Jesus to wipe his face. And the way things turned out, it fit perfectly with what was going on, to comfort people. And I'm thankful. And I want to be humble.

Kirby is a very insightful individual with a great capacity for understanding the human spirit. He believes that dance can play an important role in our society as a healing art. Unfortunately, all art is not beautiful or appreciated in the same way. Kirby finds that all dance doesn't have to be pretty to look good and be appreciated. "There are ugly dances that look really, really nice. It's a time to be creative, to push your boundaries."

> Dance should be healing. They don't appreciate the arts the way they appreciate other things. Or funded, that's a major discrepancy in how our society sees art. ... All art isn't important to understand. It's like beauty. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. You have to look at it and appreciate it for what you see.

For Kirby, beauty is not defined by the stereotypical ballet dancer's body, nor is talent. Kirby talked about how dancers not only have to compete technically in the dance world, but how they also must have the right look.

> Most of the young ladies and girls that dance for me are not your average body type. That's something I'm real particular about. There are some thin girls that move well, but they don't encompass the whole spectrum of what women or what men look like. Because, when you're in the audience, you don't want...it's supposed to be this whole ethereal thing. But you want something that's attainable. You don't know what kids are in the audience, or young adults who want to dance...and they see that and think, 'I'm never going to look like that'. It's nice to see somebody with a little weight...and you don't want to crush anybody's dreams.

A Job Not Done

Kirby's work is not done. As a proficient dancer, teacher and choreographer, he feels that there is more in store for him in this lifetime.

> The universe is creating a purpose for me to do something. And I don't think it's done, yet. A lot of things that have happened are experiences, are opportunities in my life that I would have never ever have thought would have happened. I just go with what the force is telling me to do.

Some day, Kirby would like to have his own dance company that does not fit the stereotypical mold. He elaborated on this concept by explaining that a person is

more than what you see on the outside. A real dancer must have an internal soul and be capable of expressing that passion through dance. It is the passion that connects you to the art.

> I would love to have a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-weight company. Cause I'm not one, per se, I'm not in love with stick figure dancers. Y ou know, I like to see a woman's body...butt, breasts, whatever. I like the texture of different colors and different body types.... I would like to be able to produce stuff on the concert level and be able top create that kind of rep. It's not so much what you see, the external package as it is the passion, because it is a passion when you dance. It's the passion that connects you to the art.

Kirby's own passion for dance extends into his teaching. Currently, Kirby teaches workshops for Jazz Dance World Congress and the Dance Connection and is on the faculty at Columbia College, Francis W. Parker High School, Lou Conte's, Giordano Dance Center and the Joel Hall Dance Center. Kirby elaborated on how different teaching is from performing for him.

> Teaching is interactive. I get a different feeling from teaching. Just to see the glow on someone's face when they learn a step or when they learn something they don't know already. Whereas performance, you're presenting something to someone. You're entertaining them....It's a gift that I'm giving when I teach.

Kirby feels that an important role of teaching dance is to make children feel comfortable with themselves. He believes it gives them positive awareness and self-confidence. Kirby inspires his students "with self-confidence."

Creating Awareness

Kirby agrees that dance is a vehicle that can create awareness of life issues. Although he does not know how much change can take place, Kirby believes it is important to incite awareness in society. Through dance, Kirby has been able to express personal feelings and find answers to issues with which he has struggled. He also believes that dance can impact society by creating awareness by opening up a discussion about a subject. "I don't know how much change it can bring. It can open up a subject...it can open up a discussion of what's going on." Kirby believes that it's important for the choreographer to be aware of what's going on around them in the world and "not be dancing in a fishbowl."

Like many artists, Kirby is inspired by all of life and believes that every aspect, good and bad, is a source from which to develop choreography. He believes, "Life, cause and effect and things that happen in life help to stimulate you creatively. Cause if everything was rosy, would that make all of your work rosy?"

As an African-American choreographer, Kirby realizes the strong influence of African dance and culture on modern dance today. He believes in the importance of looking at the past in order to know where we have been, where we are presently, and where we are headed in the future.

> If they would take the time to look at a tape you'd see that yes, they do (some of the movements in hip-hop come from African dance). Muntu...you'd be surprised that a lot of that movement has been picked and played around with...the pelvic, the isolations of the body...a lot of those

> movements are from Africa. They need to give them credit for the footwork and all of that. When you see *Dance Africa,* it all made sense and you'd see where a lot of modern and a lot of this pulled from this and pulled from that.... Dance is so incestuous that it all pulls from something.
> I think it is important (to look at the past) because society changes so much and our culture, in itself doesn't change, but our society changes. Some values we have now would not have been tolerated a while ago. So, it helps you to see where we were and hopefully, where we're going or where we're trying to go. Social dancing, now isn't what social dancing was then.

True to Self

Many artists may find themselves caught in a trap of having to produce works that only please the public. In an age of commercialization, it is all about what sells. The artist has an ongoing struggle to create works that have mass appeal or remain true to one's artistic expression.

> I try not to do crowd-pleasers, because then you get stuck. If every time you work, that's the first thing on your mind, it doesn't allow the artist to be imaginative or creative, because you're trying to make sure you tap into the venue or this particular crowd. You're actually stopping being true to yourself. A lot of artists do that...the minute you stop, you allow yourself to create.

The creative process, for Kirby, is not unlike many choreographers. Although he does not pre think movement, Kirby begins with a general concept or idea. Sometimes he hears the music in his head first, and then tries to find music that corresponds to what he hears.

> Mostly, I just hear the music in my head, and then I try to find actual real music that kind of matches the sound that I hear. A lot of times, I'll just start with a general concept of what I want to do. I don't pre-think movement, cause I don't work like that. Like, I cannot say that I'm going to do that section, cause it doesn't register like that.

The dancers play a big part in the choreographic process for Kirby. As he gives the dancers movement, Kirby feeds off their energy which further inspires him.

> Yes, oh definitely (the dancers are part of the process). Cause I look at them and feed off their energy. So I start with a concept and from the concept, the movement comes from me to them. It eventually gets to the place I see in my head. I go into the room, I look at the dancers and then I start. I'm starting from ground zero and we're all starting at the same time. So as the movement comes to me, it's going to them.

The artistic process is not the same for everyone. For some, it may take weeks, months, or even years for artists to achieve their vision. How does Kirby know his work is finished and what does it take for his vision to be realized? Kirby puts it this way, "I usually feel a work is done when I can exhale." The muse does not rest for long and just when one work is complete, it is time to begin another. Over the years, Kirby's choreography has changed.

> I hope it has matured. I really, really, really, really hope it has. I remember the first piece that I'd ever done. It stayed in one spot. It was just in one spot. It was all arms and shapes. I didn't know what else to do. I was scared to move.

Transformed

Dance has provided Kirby many opportunities to do things and meet people he would have never experienced otherwise. It has given him the chance to create strong and lasting relationships. In spite of his success, Kirby spoke of being empowered by these opportunities in dance. "I never would have believed the things in my life that have happened. And I'm thankful and I want to be humble." Kirby recalled the opportunities dance has afforded him.

> I've had a lot of opportunities to do things and to meet people I would have never met in my other life, because I never thought that this is what I'd be doing for a career. I don't think of it as a job, because I enjoy what I'm doing. I've had a lot of opportunities to do things and meet people I would have never met in my other life.

Kirby is especially grateful to Joel Hall for making him feel like family. Dance has given Kirby more than a feeling of being close and connected. Dance has provided an outlet to keep him emotionally healthy and sane.

> That's why I'm still there. Because that place and no other place that I've been to has that kind of feeling. Like you feel that's your family....And it's nice to say "we" as a part of the family. You know, cause that's the first place I took class and it'll probably be the last place I take class. Cause I've never felt like those people there have not cared about me at any stage of my life.It's kept me sane. It's helped me to stay sane and it's helped me to stay healthy. And it helped me cause I'm an emotional artist, I guess, to deal with some tough times in my life...and as an outlet for those.

Legacy

When asked what would be his legacy to the dance world, Kirby smiled as he said, "That he was a real person with no pretensions, just Kirby...willing to share. I like to see people happy and smiling. I would sacrifice myself for that. I would like people to learn to like...love themselves". To know Kirby, is indeed to love him. He is a very special person.

Summary

Everyone comes into dance for a different reason, for Kirby Reed, it was a life-saver. After working at a job he could no longer stand for thirteen years, Kirby was in need of a better way of life. Dance provided the answer he was looking for. After seeing a dance performance with Vanessa Truvillion, Kirby was hooked. Although he did not begin to study dance until age twenty-five, Kirby has become one of the most sought after choreographers and instructors in dance, because of his innovative style.

Kirby began taking classes at the Joel Hall Dance Center and soon found himself auditioning for the company. The relationship Kirby established with Joel Hall was more like a father and son. Kirby considers Joel to be a major influence in his life as a person and a choreographer. One reason Kirby has stayed with Joel for so long is because of the example Joel sets in creating a community without regard

to race or culture. This has set the tone for Kirby's personal goals. He would like to have his own multicultural, multiethnic, multi weight company.

Kirby is a very insightful individual with a huge capacity for understanding the human spirit. In dance, physical appearance and technical skill often take precedent over internal feeling, the dancer's drive and passion during a performance. Kirby listens to the stories dancers tell and their experiences in the profession to create his own choreographic works. He also uses personal feelings and experiences as a way to release repressed emotions and to cleanse his spirit.

Everything that happens in life creatively stimulates Kirby. He is inspired by both the good and the bad. A proficient dancer, teacher and choreographer, Kirby believes his work is not finished on this earth and feels there is more in store for him in this lifetime. He believes that the universe has created a purpose for him and Kirby is willing to go with the force, wherever it takes him.

Mel Tomlinson

Background

Dr. Mel Tomlinson has had an illustrious career as a dancer. He has been recognized in *Who's Who in Black America, in Music and Dance* as well as *Outstanding Young Man in America.* Although he did not begin to formally train in dance until he was age seventeen, he rose to become one of the leading African-American male dancers in this country, performing with Dance Theatre of Harlem,

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and New York City Ballet. Now retired from a professional performing career, Dr. Tomlinson continues to spread his knowledge and experience through movement as a master dance instructor and minister of the Christian faith.

Mel earned a BFA in Ballet at the North Carolina School of the Arts, while performing as a principal dancer with the Heritage Dance Theatre of Harlem, under the direction of Agnes De Mille. He refers to his life as a 'Cinderella' story coming from a poor background but rising to become a well known figure in dance. Mel has been honored by heads of state and audiences around the world. He has taught on the faculties of the University of North Carolina, Boston Conservatory, Harvard University, and North Carolina School of the Arts.

His rise to the top did not ensure that he would stay there without a fight. In 1995, Mel was diagnosed with the AIDS virus. Not willing to give up, he earned a masters' degree and a doctorate in Christian Counseling and Psychology from Carolina University of Theology in Stanley, North Carolina, while on his sick bed. An AIDS survivor, Mel continues to teach dance on the faculty at conventions and workshops including the Black College Dance Exchange. In 2004, Mel taught at the 23rd Annual Black College Dance Exchange on the campus of Fisk University, in Nashville, Tennessee. After observing his ballet class and reading his biography, I was so impressed that I asked him to participate in my study. Mel graciously spoke with me outside of the Memorial Gymnasium on April 3, 2004. I was pleased

to meet with him again on April 14, 2006 at the 25th Silver Black College Dance Exchange in Charlotte, North Carolina. Mel is a master of his craft who knows how to make ballet class fun and not intimidating!

Embrace Life

Mel has had a professional career as a premiere dancer with the major dance companies. He explained that although a strong technique is necessary to succeed in the dance world, it takes more than that. Mel believes the dancer must use all of life's experiences and personal feelings to enhance one's performance. Taking the performance to that next level is when the dancer becomes an artist.

> Life experiences-loss, pain, sorrow, and of course, joy. I tell my students...steps I know I can teach... feelings, I know, I can't teach. Some things are just innate. Other things, they rub off on you. But certain things I try to convey that it's ok to bring throughout in your work. And a lot of that is just individualism. Staying individual and enjoying that. Technique is a vehicle, in itself that allows you the freedom to express yourself...Everything has been done, but the way you do it...It's so personal, it reflects what you know or what you know someone's been doing...

As an educator, Mel sets the example that anyone can achieve this through hard work. He has developed a very unique style to teaching dance. He refers to his concept as, "Ballet my way" or "Mel's way." And it works! One would think that having danced with Alvin Ailey, Dance Theatre of Harlem, and City Ballet would make Mel a very intimidating teacher. He is just the opposite, being open,

accessible, and fun. Although Mel teaches the classical foundations of ballet, he appeals to the younger generation by using rhythm and blues music or drum beats for the ballet warm up at the barre.

> I try to entertain, as well as educate. I tell people, I'm working with, that's your job, not just to perform, entertain, or educate. But in order to do that, you've got to know what you're talking about, you must have that. People have a lot of living, learning and hopefully loving to do, but you've got to live. And you'll make mistakes, we all make mistakes... So, hopefully my dancers will say, yes, it's possible. The places that I mentioned where've I've been and where I'm from...look at him. If he can do it...I can do it. And they know it's not luck. And he's still doing it.

The importance of being nurtured and guided is critical in the development of a dancer. Mel was encouraged and mentored by Agnes De Mille, Arthur Mitchell, Alvin Ailey, and George Balanchine, who helped him succeed in his career. One of his first major influences in dance was De Mille, who taught him how to become an artist. She stressed the importance of being able to feel and connect with the audience.

> Agnes De Mille took me under her wing, literally. She taught me how to think and how to present myself, and that the audience must feel, and that the show must go on. And that the audience believes...How you connect with the audiences. And always connect and that dance is life and a reflection of the life at the time. That's why as life changes, dances might change.

A New World

Mel's life continued to change when he moved to New York in 1974 and joined Arthur Mitchell's Dance Theatre of Harlem because, "that's where I was supposed to dance...in an all Black ballet company, where I could grow and mature." His dance prowess earned him the principal role as the snake in Mitchell's *Manifestations.* Two years later he danced with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in *Pas de Duke* partnering with Judith Jamison, and in the revival of Lar Lubovitch's *The Time Before the Time After.* Mel returned to Dance Theatre of Harlem in 1978 as the principal dancer in *Swan Lake* and *Scheherazade.*

> All of a sudden the world opened up again. I went from modern dance to a completely new world I'd never dreamt of called The New York City Ballet with George Balanchine. The way I'd been paid by Arthur Mitchell, who in 1948 joined that company. I joined in 1981, some twenty, thirty years afterward and became soloist. It's amazing to have that relationship not only with the company but a **very** special relationship with Mr. B!

Mel Tomlinson joined the New York City Ballet as the only African American dancer in the company, winning the 'Performance of the Year Award' for his role in George Balanchine's *Agon.* While Mel was with Dance Theatre of Harlem, he had learned the ballet, *Agon* originally choreographed in 1948 for Arthur Mitchell. Little did he dream that over thirty years later, he would not only recreate the role that had earned Arthur Mitchell a name but win an award for it as well. Mel

had just returned from touring with DTH when he received a phone call from City Ballet.

> I had just come from Dance Theatre of Harlem, my last tour in Japan. Got home, the phone rings, Mr. Balanchine wants to see you! And we want to know if you know *Agon*...Peter hurt his back. So they gave me a new partner, Etta Watts. And they said, show me what you know. And I showed them the ballet from 1948, the original version. This was 1981 and everything was higher and faster. And he said, 'That's what I want. You do it the old way.' What a rehearsal!
>
> Anna Kisselgoff was out there. It was like the end of the year, too. At the end they give a recoup of all the New York City performances. And I came up with Performance of the Year, given by Mel Tomlinson who brought back the original *Agon* that we saw last night. Not only did it do well, but it did well enough to remember something that's never happened, but once. They applauded and they gave me a curtain call...three times. And it became mine. And other things became mine. It was three years I was with him, Mr. Balanchine. And three more years I stayed after his death with Peter Martins as my role model.

Dance Is the Answer

For Mel Tomlinson, dance was the answer to living an otherwise impoverished existence in a dysfunctional family. He was able to develop talents he was unaware he had, working in a career that brought great meaning to his life. Dance also gave Mel the opportunity to meet people and establish close relationships while traveling to places he would never have dreamed possible.

> It was dance that was vehicle that helped me to explore and determined everything. It also gave me the ability to build self-esteem. I didn't think that it was an occupation that I would end up doing but I ended up with it as

> a career and it's something that took me from my family and I traveled and I worked.

Mel spoke passionately about his experiences and the wonderful people who were not only his mentors, but became his friends. It was important to Mel's success as a dancer and as a person to have positive role models in his life that would support and nurture him in his career.

> It's a wonderful thing especially when someone takes time, like Agnes De Mille took time for me, and Arthur Mitchell took time for me and of course, Alvin Ailey took time for me. Then I had opportunities to later develop and then represent what I've learned and to share that with a group of people who are willing to pay to see me be different or be myself.

A Cinderella Story

Mel reflected on his early years in dance being in the presence of legendary dance icons Katherine Dunham, Alvin Ailey, Josephine Baker, T. Daddy Rice, Charles Honi Coles, the Nicholas Brothers and George Balanchine. He admits that at the time, he truly did not know the impact these people would have on his career. Although he refers to his life as a 'Cinderella' story, Mel Tomlinson does not believe that he got where he is today without hard work.

> Struggle-wise, all this basically, has been a struggle. Nothing has been easy. And people go, oh you're lucky. Luck had nothing to do with it. Opportunity, being prepared for things that came my way and taking advantage of it. Knowing good and bad habits and knowing myself. Being aware of the world around me and also having my own world to go to.

Being in the spotlight is not always as glamorous as it may appear. Mel remarked that along with fame comes the constant scrutiny of those who are always judging and watching. Mel shared the difficulty young stars experience being forced to grow up so quickly. He also spoke about the problems that come with being a male dancer.

> I had girlfriends and boyfriends and I didn't know who I was, label-wise, until my very late twenties. I was so busy learning and trying to grow up. Dancers grow up very fast. And in growing up they miss their childhood. And it happens.
>
> To be a man...first of all, there are so many problems being a male dancer. Because they label you...your softness, your feminine side...it's difficult. My thing is, when you're on that stage, I really don't care about your personal life. I've learned that and I've never gotten a reviewer to comment on my personal life.
>
> I've been in prison for a long time, since I've been a dancer, because it's like being in the zoo. You're looked at under a microscope. People will define you, you can do no wrong....I hope they're watching to learn. And I hope what they're learning is something they can use and do some good. I didn't have heroes, although Arthur Mitchell opened that door. I grew up on the farm in North Carolina. I didn't have a mentor.

When Mel joined New York City Ballet in 1981, several decades after Arthur Mitchell, he was the only African-American member in the company. Mel described feeling alone and separated by his color. Even though he was confident in his ability, he still had to justify himself, as an African-American dancer.

> And then I was responsible for holding down the title of principal dancer and being a star. It's a hardship being the only one...being a Black person, how they just separate you, being light-skinned, dark-skinned, passing... I can't

> pass, I am Black. And I had to equate that with what I thought I was supposed to do. I just happen to be Black. I'm not a Black dancer, I'm a good dancer, who happens to be Black.

Dealing with Prejudice

Mel Tomlinson had danced for the major dance companies – Dance Theatre of Harlem, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and New York City Ballet. Mel had aspired to become one of the leading Black male dancers in ballet, following in Arthur Mitchell's footsteps. After learning the dance *Agon* from Mitchell while Mel was with Dance Theatre of Harlem, he recreated the role for the New York City Ballet. In spite of the acclaim he had won for his dancing, Mel was still the victim of cruel words and prejudice.

> And the curtain goes up and we're performing onstage, and there are four men onstage with our backs to the audience...White, White, there's a spade...we turn around and they go, 'Oh!' It was so quiet.
>
> You are who you are genetically. Because if we had choices, I would have real blue eyes and blonde hair. I would have had lighter skin in City Ballet. I was Black in City Ballet...this is who I am. So when you find out that...And just be comfortable with that.

It is difficult to comprehend how a man of his stature, or any human being, would be subjected to racial innuendos. Mel related the type of comments he had to deal with from one choreographer, in particular.

> Give me the Negro 'stat' give me the banana slide... I can see now, why the way he was talking to me and what he thought I could understand. He

> wanted the steps from me and the only way he could get it was to equate the 'Al Jolson hands'...and I was like the, what hands? You mean you want a port a bras like this? You can say 'port a bras'...you don't have to say 'Al Jolson hands'. Or the 'Negro slide'...you want me to go glissade. Yes, glissade, but on your heels. 'Banana slide'...so, it's getting there. Someone has to open their mouth, their eyes and ears and say, this is what you mean and this is how you can say it.

Rising to the Top and Falling Down

Mel had reached the height of a rich and fulfilling career having performed as a principal dancer for Dance Theatre of Harlem, Alvin Ailey, and City Ballet. He had learned to become more than a performer, he learned how to be an artist.

> As I grew older, and this mainly happened with Ailey, later, and with City Ballet, I stopped being a performer and I became an artist. All I had to do was walk out on to the stage and the audience came to me. And to this day, they come to me, simply by my presence, my openness. I'm very, I hope, accessible. I turn no one away. I know there are people who don't have time for you. I do, this is who I am. I'm not on a pedestal looking down, I'm looking around, others are looking down.

Mel left the New York City Ballet, in 1987, to return home to teach at his alma mater, North Carolina School of the Arts, and in 1991, he joined the Boston Ballet as a performer and teacher. Then, he was diagnosed with the AIDS virus. In his own words Mel stated,

> I got to the top of the mountain, as they say, I fell down. I'm an AIDS survivor, since 1995, July 25th. I was hit with the AIDS virus. I was out for four years, with a diagnosis you will die, of course we all are going to die. But they gave me three days at the very end of my four years. So now, I speak. Now I show people. You don't have to die from something like that.

> You don't know when you're going to go. You don't have any control over that. That's God's work, but the thing is to be ready.
>
> While you're here, make the best of it. And don't be selfish. Love yourself, but don't be selfish. Love yourself, but you do have the ability to share that through your work and how you live. Because you can change the outside all you want, but if you don't accept what's inside, you really don't reflect anything you want to say through your words.

Being sick proved to be a time of reflection for Mel Tomlinson. It was also a time for him to continue his studies, this time in psychology at the Carolina University of Theology.

> I would not have received my masters and my doctorate, and I did that on my sick bed, by the way, without the discipline, scheduling, timing, patience...and dance did that. I wanted to know what makes a dysfunctional family, dysfunctional. What is it about being different? Is it the color? Is it personality? Is it the financial status? Is it the environment? Psychology has always been a love of mine. And I have found so many answers through movement, through people, through people who can't move. Having been sick gave me lots of time, of course, to reflect on so much.

Mel brings years of life experience with him to demonstrate how perseverance and hard work helped him achieve his dreams. His discipline and devotion to dance enabled Mel to rise above poverty, dysfunction and discrimination. He is an example to people everywhere that hard work, discipline and determination equals success.

> When I look back finally, on my career, my life, it has been an incredible journey, almost unbelievable.... Yes, the White House four times...so many people. And they were meeting me all of a sudden. And I would have, if I would have known when I met Josephine Baker, asked for an autograph.

> And they wanted my autograph, me! To have achieved a sense of, I'm somebody. It's a great feeling and a responsibility.

Legacy

Reflecting on one's life gives meaning and purpose to it. For Mel, it has been an incredible journey.

> When I look back finally, on my career, my life, it has been an incredible journey, almost unbelievable...Now that I've gone through my little road... I feel like I have something to share! Now I'm history, not dead history, but living history. I'm working on my own book called, "Encore, Again" because I'm determined not only to have it in history but to continue in my life to represent Black dance or dance.

Summary

Mel Tomlinson's rise to become one of America's premiere dancers did not come without struggle. He described his life as a 'Cinderella' story, growing up in poverty, dysfunction, and discrimination. Although Mel never dreamed of dance as being an occupation, it was the vehicle that changed his life.

Mel was fortunate to be mentored by Agnes De Mille, Arthur Mitchell, Alvin Ailey, and George Balanchine. Having great role models gave Mel the ability to build self-esteem, and grow and mature into an artist. Mel did not begin to study dance until he was seventeen, but his exposure to gymnastics in high school helped him develop a muscular body and disciplined mind.

After dancing locally in North Carolina, Mel moved to New York in 1974 and joined the Dance Theatre of Harlem, because that was where he believed he was supposed to go. Mel's ability earned him the principal role as the snake in Mitchell's *Manifestations* and proved to be the stepping stone that would catapult his career. Soon offers were coming in asking Mel to dance. In 1976, he joined the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater where he partnered with Judith Jamison in *Pas de Duke* and *The Time Before Time After*. He returned to the Dance Theatre of Harlem in 1978 as the principal dancer in *Swan Lake* and *Scheherazade.* In 1981, Mel joined the New York City Ballet and recreated Arthur Mitchell's role of *Agon,* earning Mel Performance of the Year. He remained a member of City Ballet until 1987, when he returned home to teach at North Carolina School of the Arts. Mel then joined the Boston Ballet in 1991, where he performed and taught until he was diagnosed with AIDS.

Today, Mel teaches ballet at universities and for dance conferences around the country. As an ordained minister, with a doctorate in theology, Mel hopes to educate and inspire his students on not only how to become proficient dancers, but how to become good people. Mel's illustrious career as a dancer has not gone unnoticed. He appears in *Who's Who in the World, in Black America in Music and Dance.* Mel's life history is contained in his autobiography, *Encore Again.*

Pierre Lockett

Background

Pierre Lockett, Director of Education and Community Engagement for the Joffrey Ballet in Chicago, started dancing when he was eighteen, while studying to be a pharmacist at the University of Montevallo, Alabama. His interest in social dance lead him to audition for the school dance group.

> I didn't know a single step. I went to the audition in blue jeans, a t-shirt and bare feet.... And everybody else had been dancing for years...I had some flexibility. I didn't know what first position was when I walked in... I had seen very little dance in my life, nothing professional, just what I'd seen on tv. The woman who was in charge of the group saw me on campus and asked me, why aren't you taking any of my dance classes? She said, I think you could be a professional dancer. And that's how I got started. Once I started with dance, I really loved it.

Pierre admits that he always enjoyed watching The Tony Awards, the June Taylor Dancers and the Carol Burnett Show, but had never seen a live performance of ballet or theatre. Realizing that he was starting late, Pierre pursued his new career knowing he would need to be focused and driven to succeed. He had a great teacher and the support of his parents, although he admits, they were not too thrilled when he told them he wanted to change his major to dance. Coming from a poor family, Pierre's father always wanted a better life for his son and Pierre wanted his dad to know that he would be ok and did not have to worry about him. "That was really my inspiration to succeed. I wanted them to be proud of me in this career."

Pierre began taking ballet classes in his hometown of Mobile, Alabama and after training for a year and a half, went to New York where he auditioned for the Joffrey Ballet and received a scholarship to study there. After studying with the Joffrey, Pierre auditioned for Dance Theatre of Harlem where he also received a scholarship. In 1982, he got an apprenticeship to the company and stayed with them for the next six years. Pierre then joined the Princeton Ballet for a nine month contract. In 1989, Pierre joined the Joffrey Ballet and danced with them for the next thirteen years. He officially retired from the stage in 2002, and took over the position of Director of Education and Community Engagement.

Pierre has appeared in commercials, television and the films *Save the Last Dance* and *The Company*. He is the recipient of the Princess Grace Award and the Black Theatre Alliance Award. Pierre was the National Dance Association's Keynote Speaker at the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance Convention in 2005.

I had the opportunity to meet Pierre in October 2005, when he came to Chicago State University to work with my students as part of a six week intensive ballet program, culminating in a performance, "An Evening of Fine Arts Featuring the Joffrey Ballet." Pierre was demanding and exacting of my students, challenging them to reach new heights they had not attained before. Working with Pierre was an experience I am sure the students and I will never forget. On January 19, 2006, I

interviewed Pierre at the Joffrey Ballet headquarters. He was gracious and cordial as we began.

Instilling Values

When asked what role dance has played in his life, Pierre responded that dance has created the person that he is. Dance set the high standards that Pierre has always prided himself in and lives by.

> Dance has created the person that I am now... Dance Theatre of Harlem was a major factor in my development both artistically and professionally and it really set the standards by which I live my life today. ...For me it goes much farther than dance. It just goes on to personal daily living and existence, and my life.

He learned the meaning of discipline from the very beginning of his dance career. In 1980, when Pierre first ventured to New York, all he did was dance. With the twenty-five dollars a week his parents sent him, he did not even have money to go to the movies. Pierre, who stayed with his aunt, used the money for subway fare into the city to take classes. The values instilled by his family and his experience with the Dance Theatre of Harlem helped to build Pierre's integrity. He described the Dance Theatre of Harlem company as being very family-oriented, with everyone always watching out for each other and working toward the same goal. "And that goal was to let people know that African Americans can do ballet."

Overcoming Obstacles

Pierre recalled the company always getting bad reviews from the critics. Arthur Mitchell wanted to prove the critics wrong. He was determined to prove that African-American dancers could do ballet. Arthur Mitchell was a great role model, setting the example for how he expected the company to behave professionally. This included not only on stage but off stage as well, in the way they dressed, spoke and conducted themselves. He maintained that they were not only representing Dance Theatre of Harlem, but they were representing all African-Americans dancers.

> 'You're representing something bigger than yourself.'...And that goal was to let people know that African Americans can do ballet. We always got bad reviews, not because of the dancing but because it was just this stereotype. You know they're good in the African pieces but... And so we were just out to prove to everybody that we could do this. People just always thought we were going to be this group of thugs from Harlem who were out to dance.

Arthur Mitchell was a great role model for Pierre as a dancer and as a person. With a strong set of values already in place, Pierre was ready to make his mark in the world of ballet.

> I think probably the greatest influence in my professional life has been Arthur Mitchell, because of the standards he set. He didn't only set those standards for his company. He had to endure quite a bit to have achieved the level of success as a black dancer at City Ballet. He had to overcome a lot of obstacles, but I feel that what he gave to the African American, Blacks, not

> just to African Americans, predominantly, but to everybody who came through the doors of Dance Theatre of Harlem, he set the standards, himself. So, professionally, it would be him as my greatest influence.

Pierre performed with Dance Theatre of Harlem for the next six years, traveling the world, meeting people and having opportunities he would never have had otherwise.

> I got to travel a lot, see a lot of the world, meet new people. It was an incredible experience. It is not something I would have gotten had I stayed in Mobile, Alabama.

One of the most exciting and memorable experiences Pierre had at Dance Theatre of Harlem was with Geoffrey Holder, who choreographed *Dugala.* The piece is about a wedding ceremony that takes place in a little African village. It is filled with pomp and circumstance and performed to live drums. The company was performing at the New York State Theater, at Lincoln Center, which was a far cry from Harlem. Geoffrey wanted the dancers to know that they were capable of performing in this primarily White venue. What stands out in Pierre's mind, even today, was the way Geoffrey inspired the dancers to go onstage with all of the energy and pride contained in that piece.

> During the rehearsal, Geoffrey came onstage gathering everyone around and told them, 'We're going to let all these folks here, know what we're capable of doing. They've never seen anything like this, here in this theater....' So he went to the edge of the stage and he told the conductor to start the music, and he started the music and he did the dance right there on stage with us to

> get us pumped up and revved up for the performance, that we were going to have that night. And it's always stuck with me.

Geoffrey Holder was a wonderful source of inspiration for Pierre and had a tremendous effect on him as a dancer and a person. Pierre has carried that experience with him into his life and his work.

> That was a very important moment in my life, and since this is really about African American choreographers, I think that what he gave to me, in particular and to the dancers who were in the Dance Theatre of Harlem, went so much farther than just dancing. He gave them a sense of self-worth, huge pride because *Dugala* was all about pride. It didn't have a whole lot of steps in it but it demonstrated the pride and confidence of the people.

Artistic Freedom

Pierre performed with the Dance Theatre of Harlem for the next six years. He then signed a nine month contract to dance with the Princeton Ballet. Just when Pierre was about to renew, the Joffrey Ballet called and offered him a contract. Pierre joined the Joffrey Ballet in 1989, where he danced for the next thirteen years. Pierre had a remarkable relationship with the Joffrey's director, Gerald Arpino.

Pierre recalled a scene from the movie, *The Company,* which is based on the story of the Joffrey Ballet, where Gerald Arpino and Pierre were at odds over a piece of choreography. Everyday, he would come in and want to make a change in the dance.

> He would say, 'I would just like to change something.' And I would say, 'Well, you just changed this yesterday.' And he said, 'Oh, just do it like this.' And I said, 'Oh, I can't do that because of the next step I've got to do is this.' He says, 'Well, do something else.' And this is where me having respect for him as a choreographer and as a director, and him having respect for me as an artist, I said, 'Let me think about it and then I'll have something, tomorrow.
>
> I had been dancing at this point, for about fifteen years. Mr. Arpino had seen me do a number of things, some things that are dramatic, some things that are comedic, some things that are sexually erotic. So this was an opportunity for me to do something else and for him to really, really pull something out of me that I would have never done had there been another choreographer. He gave me a lot of artistic freedom. He gave me a ton of guidance...That comes with years and years and years of coming together.

The Role of the Artist

Pierre is firm in his conviction that it is the artist's responsibility to make the audience understand what he/she doing. Although there are many forms and styles of dance, every ballet or dance movement should have meaning. Even if the dancer is just standing onstage, there must be a purpose. The dancer can stand defiant, proud, sad or broken down.

On the concert level, the role of dance may be to entertain, inspire or provoke someone's consciousness. Pierre believes that the objective of dance is to entertain. He thinks it is important to keep in mind that people go to the theater to be entertained. Pierre does not believe they go to the ballet to see the same problems they have at home on the stage.

> If you're going to make that statement, make it and put it in a way that it's entertaining enough that people will walk away from the ballet thinking about it. Let's put something out there...so they can go away and think, wow! What happened? What could have happened? Why did this happen? And let them draw their own conclusion.

Pierre maintains it is the artist's responsibility to communicate realism to the audience. He achieves this by drawing upon his emotional responses to life situations and using mental imagery to get his ideas across.

> Because if it's real, then they get it. They know what it is. Like for instance, with the gospel piece. If you can see that, you know, between the words and the emotions and the steps...you've got to get that across. Realism. Make it real and it doesn't matter if you're doing sauté arabesque. How does it feel? I'm hopping through a field of flowers. If I'm happy and you've got to know that I'm happy. So what makes me happy? What is my mental image to get that message across? It's all mental and emotional.

When performing, Pierre feels very different for each role depending on what the role calls for. It is an emotional and artistic experience for him, which requires that he give himself completely to the experience.

> I can't say that I feel happy or I feel elated or light or one with the universe. It's a very dramatic, emotional....I feel emotional. And the emotion depends on the dance that I'm doing. Dance is artistic for me.
>
> I did a ballet called, *Othello,* the choreography was by John Butler. It was one of the most exciting things I've ever done. Because when I was at Dance Theatre of Harlem, this was a piece that I always wanted to do....Now, I've never done the ballet, but I'd seen it in my head. And all I did, I just relied on emotion. How would you react... if you were in love? How do you react when somebody tells you something or shows you something that you know is just going to destroy you and you feel that you'll

> never recover in that one instant. And how does it feel to confront somebody that you love? How does betrayal feel? How would you react to that? So, when the lights came up, I became Othello. And what happened was, when I went onstage I wasn't Pierre anymore.

Vessel

To prepare for a performance, Pierre would lapse into a zoning period, emptying himself of all feeling, emotion, and preconceived concept of what the ballet was going to be. He emptied himself of everything so that he could become a receiving vessel.

> In the ballet *Touch Me,* a gospel piece choreographed by Gerald Arpino, Pierre performed a nine minute solo. "The whole message behind the song in, 'Touch me so that I can be...' So I took the words from the song, 'Touch me, why me, use me as a vessel to go out and spread your word.' And so I did it with the song. ... At the time that I was learning this particular dance, my brother had just died from cancer, and he and never seen me dance. So my brother was really, kind of my inspiration for me to...I always thought of him when I did it.

What happened onstage was different every time. Although Pierre instinctively executed the choreography he was given, he let himself go and allowed the experience to take over. Pierre believes dance can be an emotional outlet.

> And it got to the point that I was really comfortable doing this and I would get so wrapped up in it that I would always break down and just really be hysterically crying in the ballet. And there was always complete silence throughout the whole thing. And it was because, it was this very eerie feeling. Because I'm dancing, the music is very somber, the atmosphere is very somber, um, and I just let it take me wherever it wanted to go. It was probably one of the most amazing experiences of my life.

> If you're willing to give over to the dance and just take yourself out of it and just really open yourself up emotionally, spiritually... I did it for a lot of roles that I did, it wasn't just for this one particular role that had a spiritual meaning, but for everything. It's an outlet, you can use it as an outlet. If you use it correctly, if you're true to it, the feelings that you will have, then the audience is going to get it.

Make It Real

Pierre only began choreographing this past year through the educational programs at the Joffrey Ballet. He takes ballets that are in the company's repertory and modifies them so that the students can do it. Since most of the students haven't had a lot of dance training, Pierre selects dances that don't have a lot of technical elements, but still gives them enough of a challenge and pushes them to a level of professionalism in the performance.

> What I try to do, I try to tell kids to make it real... How would you do this if you were out with your friends and you were in the middle of the group and everyone was cheering you on. Make it real for you. And that's what I did. Make it real for you. Use your own emotions, use your own experiences to bring this up.
>
> Again, so it's got to be emotional and it's got to be real. And if you make it real then the audience is going to buy it. And that emotion can be a number of things. The piece that I did for the kids for the praise dance piece...again, it has to have some emotion in it. If you have been, and anybody who's been, I can only say, in the black gospel experience, particularly in church, and most of those kids have, they understood what I meant by...at this point you guys should all be so full of emotional, spiritual energy, and it's got to come through in the dance.

When he choreographs, Pierre draws from life experience. He may begin with the music, paying close attention to the words, and then just begin moving. For Pierre, the dance is really more about attitude and presentation than the execution of steps. It is important to him to be able to draw the audience in.

> I think life inspires art. I like to use, for me, in my personal experience, I think that life inspires artistry. That's for me. Because I've taken experiences that are real and put that real emotional element into my dancing.
>
> I did this piece called, *Work Out.* It's jazzy and it's by Ru Paul.... I listened to the words of the song and I just had no idea what was going to happen when I went in to start choreographing. I just put the music on and started moving around and said, oh, I like this and I like that. I'll put a kick here. But a lot of it's really more about attitude and presentation than it is about steps. And that's the process for me, because you don't need to do five turns to make it right. You just need to have some clean lines, very direct focus and gumption. That's what the audience wants to see. You know the people who can do two pirouettes will throw two pirouettes in their piece, but it doesn't flow. If I was working with someone professional, I would say, ok, this is what I want. This is the basic skeletal outline, now what can you do? At that I would have seen them. I would know if they're flexible, if they can jump really high, what their performance elements are like. Can they be dramatic or can they be comical or can they be intense. Can you pull the audience in?

Crossing Borders

Pierre believes that dance can play a role in educating society. It doesn't matter where you come from or what your background is, if you work hard, you can become a dancer.

> I think that dance educates society for me as a Black man or the role of the Black dancer. It just shows that anybody can do this. It doesn't matter where you come from or what your background is.
>
> A person doing tombe, pas de bourree, glissade, grand jete can be of any race, any color as long as you execute the movement clearly. Then it shouldn't matter. I think that dance educates society for me as a Black man or the role of the Black dancer. It just shows you that anybody can do this. So hopefully, what it could do, what we would like for it to do, is break down some of those barriers. That anybody can do this. Or it's not an elitist art form.

The ability to break barriers by crossing cultures was evident in the reception Pierre got when he performed the piece *Touch Me* in Israel. His pas de deux, *Light Rain* thrilled the audiences to a standing ovation. The Israeli people seemed to understand the message he was trying to portray and enjoy the music.

> Dance, they say, and I didn't write this, dance is the universal language. When I did this *Touch Me* piece over in Israel, there religion is completely different from mine. But they got it. They really got it. I don't even know if they understood the music, but they got it. I got a standing ovation at the end. The *Light Rain* pas de deux is about sensuality between a man and a woman. You don't have to be black, white, Asian. It definitely crosses all barriers.

Dance as Education

As Director of the Education and Outreach Program for the Joffrey Ballet, Pierre is using dance as an educational tool to builds life skills and instill self-confidence in today's youth. Although these children are not necessarily going to become professional dancers, Pierre believes dance provides a training ground

where they can learn values. Dance not only teaches discipline but the cooperation required to work together as a team. Pierre wants to inspire children with the confidence to make their dreams come true. He feels that there are many talented kids who have the capabilities of becoming professional dancers if they are exposed to the art.

> In the programs that I run for the Joffrey, I think there are a lot of really talented kids who have the capabilities of doing what I do, they've just got to be exposed to it. They also need to know that they can do this. And it doesn't matter when you start.
>
> On an educational level, I feel the role is really to...if you work hard and want it, you can have it. Because that's how it was for me. Somebody just said, 'You know you can do this.' ...If I can do it, these kids can do it. You just set the standard and set the tone and make them do it. Try to make them see the importance that discipline can play in their lives.

Pierre realizes that technical dance training is a requisite, but elaborates that becoming a professional dancer goes beyond technique. A dancer must be able to think, make connections, and then take the dance to a performance level.

> Discipline, hard work, technical training is very important. It doesn't matter when they start, but they need to begin by copying what they see. Traditional classes are important. The challenge in thinking comes with...it's all kind of linked. You teach them technique class so they learn how to do steps. You teach them steps so they can pick up the choreography. Once you teach them the choreography, who's teaching them how to dance and to perform to put the show on? The performance element needs to be incorporated into everything formally.
>
> I think probably what is most important is having an instructor who knows what they're talking about. Somebody who knows what they're doing and can get the kids to go with their vision.

Pierre believes in the importance of having a qualified instructor who has a vision. That requires having a keen eye and paying close attention to detail. The mission of the Joffrey Educational Outreach Program is: Developing life skills, Cultural awareness, Discipline, Self-empowerment, Partnership, and Enthusiasm. Pierre does all that through his work in the Chicago public schools and parks.

Leaving a Legacy

Pierre Lockett is as meticulous in his teaching and performance as he is in his appearance. He demands perfection from himself and expects the same from his students. He is exacting in his approach, challenging himself and the people he works with. How would Pierre like the dance world to remember him?

> When I was dancing, I would like them to think that I was an extraordinary artist. And now, as a dance educator, I would like for people to say that I made a difference in a kid's life. That's what I would like. And it's different now, because I don't dance anymore. So, I think that what I'm doing now in education is important. It's where my focus is right now. I've kind of left the whole dancing thing behind and it's just a memory in the forefront.

Summary

Pierre believes dance has created the person he is today. He attributes Dance Theatre of Harlem as playing a major factor in his development artistically, professionally, and personally. Arthur Mitchell set high standards for the company, both on and off stage, which influenced Pierre to set the same standards for himself.

Pierre developed self-esteem, pride, and confidence in himself, as a person and as a performer. Pierre described Dance Theatre of Harlem as a very family oriented company, with everyone always looking out for each other and working toward the same goal. "And that goal was to let people know that African Americans can do ballet!"

His technical ability afforded Pierre a fruitful career with artistic freedom. After dancing with DTH for six years, Pierre joined the Princeton Ballet, and in 1989, he became a member of the Joffrey Ballet. Pierre danced with the Joffrey for the next thirteen years. He has appeared in commercials, television, and film, and is the recipient of many distinguished honors and awards.

As a performer, Pierre has traveled nationally and internationally. He believes that dance is the universal language because it can be understood in any language. The ability to cross cultures was evident in the reception Pierre got when he performed *Light Rain* in Israel. *Light Rain,* which is about the sensuality between a man and a woman, thrilled the audience to a standing ovation. Dance crosses all barriers. One doesn't have to be of a particular race or culture to understand that.

When choreographing, Pierre draws from his experiences. He begins first by listening to a piece of music, then the words, and then he begins to move. Although Pierre realizes that it is the choreographer's job to create the dance, he feels the most important part of the process is the dancers who perform the piece.

Pierre believes that dance should make a statement and that it is the artist's responsibility to make the audience understand what it is you are doing. Can you pull the audience in? He draws from his own emotions to create a character on stage, asking himself, "How does betrayal feel...how would you react if you were in love?"

Once a prolific dancer, Pierre is now turning his attention to empowering students, helping to make their dreams come true. As the Director of Education and Community Engagement for the Joffrey Ballet in Chicago, Pierre maintains that dance can instill life values and help young people achieve their goals. He also believes dance can educate society and eliminate some of the barriers we have created.

Chapter Summary

The above dancers and choreographers believe that dance should tell a story, make a statement, or have meaning. Randy always tells a story when he choreographs because it makes sense to the audience and they are used to storytelling as children. Randy generally has a message in his choreography that he hopes to convey to the audience. The audience may not always interpret the message intended and may even have its own ideas. What is important to Randy is that the audience is engaged, inspired, and entertained by his work. He is

completely inspired by life and pays close attention to everything so that he can paint a nice picture onstage.

Life experience is a source of inspiration for his choreography and Randy draws from personal experience and observation. Some of his work deals with issues about homosexuality, AIDS, death, love, and the drudgery of work. Through these topics, Randy has expressed emotional feelings of grief, anger, yearning, and desperation. His works are powerful and contain profound messages. Randy feels that it is a spiritual guidance taking place when he choreographs. The ideas work through him and just keep coming. He feels that God has given him a gift to be shared and that it what he is doing.

Randy's choreography has changed through the years becoming more internal and less presentational, with the feeling coming from the inside. Although he does create pieces that are designed to be entertaining, they most often still have a message. As a teacher, Randy believes that it is all about the students. He is there for them and wants to be encouraging and make them feel comfortable.

Kirby agrees that choreography should make sense. Not all choreography needs to tell a story or have meaning, but it should make sense. He tries not to do crowd pleasers, maintaining that the artist must remain true to himself, and adds that all dance does not have to be pretty to be appreciated. Kirby hopes his choreography has matured. He generally begins with a concept, hearing the music in

his head. He does not pre think the movement but rather feeds off the energy of the dancers he is working with.

Kirby believes it is a passion that connects you to the art. He is inspired by all of life and uses these experiences as subjects for his work. Kirby has dealt with issues of betrayal, stereotypes, and his brother's passing. He believes that dance should be healing, and has choreographed one piece following the tragedy of September 11, as a way to comfort people. Kirby admits that he is more at peace when he choreographs, using dance as an emotional outlet and as a way to keep sane. As a teacher, Kirby wants to make his students feel comfortable and inspire them with positive awareness and self confidence. He enjoys the interaction of teaching and the satisfaction in seeing students master a new step. Kirby describes the teaching experience as one in which he can give students a gift.

Reflecting on one's life gives meaning and purpose to it. For Mel, it has been an incredible journey. Mel believes the dancer must use all of life's experiences and personal feelings to enhance his performance: life experiences, loss, pain, sorrow, and of course, joy. As an artist, he is aware of the world around him and uses that awareness in his performance. Agnes De Mille taught him the importance of connecting to the audience and always making the audience believe in the performance. Taking his performance to that next level is when Mel realized he became an artist. According to Mel, dance is life and a reflection of the life at the time. That's why as life changes, dances might change.

For Mel Tomlinson, dance was the answer to living an otherwise impoverished existence in a dysfunctional family. Through dance, Mel gained a sense of identity, purpose, and responsibility. He was able to develop talents he was unaware he had while working in a career that brought great meaning to his life. Dance also gave Mel the opportunity to meet people and establish close relationships, while traveling to places he would never have dreamed possible.

Mel does not believe he got where he is today without hard work. He described it all as being a struggle and that his success had nothing to do with luck, and everything to do with being prepared. As an educator, Mel sets the example that anyone can achieve success through discipline and hard work.

Pierre believes that the choreography should generally make a statement and that the artist is responsible for creating dance that says something and has a purpose. A piece that makes a powerful statement challenges the audience to reflect on what they saw. For Pierre, dance is not only about giving voice to your emotion but being able to open yourself up and give in to the emotion. He maintains that while choreography is an outlet for the artist to express emotions, it is the performer's responsibility to bring those emotions to the stage.

When choreographing, Pierre begins first with the music, listening to the words, and emphasizing the movement and feeling rather than steps. He believes choreography should make an emotional statement and have some emotional impact for the dancer and the audience. Pierre tries to bring the dancers to a performance

level where it becomes emotional and real, drawing the audience into the performance. He believes that attitude and presentation are more important than the number of pirouettes executed.

According to Pierre, life inspires art, and he uses life experiences as his inspiration, whether performing or choreographing. Pierre draws upon personal feelings and reactions to life experience, using the emotions of love and betrayal in one work, and the spiritual and emotional energy of the Black church in another.

As a teacher, Pierre wants to make a difference in a child's life. He was fortunate to have Arthur Mitchell as a role model who instilled in him the values and principles that guide his life today. Pierre believes that dance can teach life skills and instill self-confidence. He wants his students to know that through hard work and discipline, they can achieve their dreams regardless of their background or the color of their skin. Pierre believes dance can educate society about the contributions of Black dancers. While with Dance Theatre of Harlem, the company proved to the world that African Americans can do ballet.

Life experience, as in the works of many choreographers, is one source of inspiration for the participants in this study as well. What may be of interest is that the topics these contemporary artists use to create choreography are not unique to the African-American experience. Many choreographers, including these artists, believe life inspires art. The interviewed individuals revealed a concern for creating meaningful choreography that has a message. The responses to the interview

questions indicate that these individuals not only possess a deep respect for their art, but also a respect for the audience coming to view their work. They do not create abstract dance without a purpose. These very talented choreographers want to be taken seriously and respected. This need may stem from a long history of African Americans having to continually prove themselves in a European-American culture. It may also come from the desire to make meaning of their personal lives.

CHAPTER 5

DANCE AS EDUCATIONAL DISCOURSE

"Artists have the opportunity to speak for the soul of a nation. They are part shaman, intellectual and romantic...and ultimately, if their vision is rich enough, their art speaks across epochs to the overall glory of human life."
(Marsalis, in Tracy, 2004, p. 10)

The category Dance as Educational Discourse includes choreography to communicate, create a forum for discussion, and educate. For many of the participants in this study, dance is the way they best communicate their thoughts. These artists use their bodies not only to express feelings but also to create a dialogue about these feelings. Dance can open up a conversation about issues that may seem a bit sensitive.

Before any formal language existed, dance was a means of communication (Sorell, 1967). Dance is one way people have been able to articulate their thoughts through movement. Some of the choreographers interviewed consider dance to be the "universal language" able to cross cultures as a way to communicate. For others, dance is the medium through which they best communicate to the world. It is their language.

The following artists have used the medium of dance as a way to communicate and educate society: Iantha Tucker, Dianne Maroney-Grigsby, Peter Fields, and Joan Hamby Burroughs.

Iantha Tucker

Background

Dr. Iantha Tucker, earned her B.A. and M.S. from Morgan State University in Baltimore, Maryland, where she currently teaches and is the Director of the Morgan State University Modern Dance Ensemble. Iantha completed her dissertation, "The Role of African Americans in Dance: From Slavery to the Present," and received her Ph.D. at New York University in 1983. She studied with Vera Cole in Baltimore, and Buddy Phillips and Syvilla Fort, members of the Katherine Dunham Company, in New York. Iantha is one of the founding members of the Black College Dance and a former president of the organization. She hosted the Black College Dance Exchange in 1986, 1993 and in 2001, co-hosted the 20th Annual Black College Dance Exchange, "The Millennium and Beyond".

I first met Iantha at the 10th Annual Black College Dance Exchange, in 1999, on the campus of Prairie View A & M University, in Prairie View, Texas. Iantha, a noted dance historian on "The Role of African Americans in Dance in the United States," has presented at the Smithsonian Institute, National Museum of American History and has developed and presented papers for the International Association of

Blacks in Dance, as well as for the Black College Dance Exchange. According to Iantha, "I personally feel that we have had a major, major role in dance, in all aspects of dance." I was thrilled when I accessed her dissertation and hoped that she would consent to participate in my study. On April 3, 2004 at the 23rd Annual Black College Dance Exchange, I had the opportunity to interview Iantha. She eagerly sat down with me outside the Memorial Gymnasium on the campus of Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee.

Her First Love

Iantha's decision to become a dancer was an emotional choice. She described dance as being her first love, something she is passionate about. Iantha prepared for a career in dance at a very early age. Starting at the age of four, she began taking classes at the YWCA in Baltimore, and continued throughout her elementary and high school years. Iantha claims that she danced every place that she could and will continue to dance for the rest of her life. She believes that dance is a part of life and that in a way, we are all dancers. When I asked Iantha why she became a dancer, she replied that, "Dance is my first love. I have loved dancing since the first day I stepped into the studio at age four. I'm passionate about it."

Those individuals who espouse a love of dance have knowingly or unknowingly been influenced by a person or an experience. For some, it may be the act of viewing a dance performance, participating in a dance program, or being

mentored by a respected teacher. For Iantha, there was one very special person who most influenced her to pursue her dreams of dance; her first dance teacher that she had as a preteen. "Her name was Vera Cole. She was the one. She started me loving dance and as a result of that, I've gone on to be influenced by, and studied with other people because of what she imparted in me."

Making a Choice

After graduating from high school in Baltimore, Iantha attended the Harlem Hospital School of Nursing in New York. While she was there, she took classes at the Phillips-Fort Studio, the same studio where Alvin Ailey's company was rehearsing in the 60s. Although she never took class from Ailey, she ran into him a few times in the dance center.

> I was at the school, but he was not teaching at the time, when I was there. But I did run into him a couple of times and one time he said, 'I know you. I know you from someplace' and I said, 'Oh, I just take classes, here.' I think it comes from that time when I was taking classes in that same place, where he was in the 1960s... And I think, oh, if I'd just stayed, you know, instead of going home...but that's what I chose to do.

After graduating from nursing school, Iantha made the choice to return to Baltimore where she danced in various small companies. Iantha continued her education at Morgan State University, earning a bachelor's degree in physical education with a concentration in dance. She then taught physical education in the Baltimore city public school system, developing and directing a dance group, while

she was there. In 1970, she decided to go back to Morgan State for her masters degree in physical education, again with a dance concentration, "because at HBCU's, as you are aware, we don't have dance majors. So, in order to get dance, it is under the physical education department." In 1972, Iantha was offered a job at Morgan State, in the department of physical education teaching dance. She decided to continue her education and took a leave to earn a doctorate in dance education at New York University. When Iantha returned to Morgan State in 1976, she became director of the Modern Dance Ensemble and has been there ever since! She recalls, "Teaching dance has always been a joy for me. I can remember in the early years at Morgan thinking they are paying me to do what I have so much fun doing!"

Say Yes to Dance!

After the Civil War, colleges were built in predominantly African-American neighborhoods with the purpose of providing skills to former slaves in order to make a living. Because dance was looked at as more of a frivolity than a career, it was not offered as part of a curriculum of studies.

> Take for example, that in historically Black colleges, we still don't have dance majors. And that goes back to slavery and emancipation, especially where we have these land grants, colleges and all. The emphasis was on teaching the freed Africans, now the African American, a trade so they could survive in American society. Well, dance was not a part of a trade, so dance was not something you would consider having as a major.

The perception of dance not being a viable career is prevalent even today in many institutions. Because of that belief, dance classes are frequently offered in the physical education department at many universities.

> That kind of influence still permeates our institutions, and so 98% of HBCU's do not have dance majors. We know in our society and our world, that dance is so important and there are so many different things that can be done in dance, not just performance, so many things related to dance. If we can get people to join us in our thinking and let us have our majors, that we're trying to have, then we would be able to have many more dancers coming through our schools than we do. And we do have dancers coming through our schools, as you know. Some who have professional aspirations, some who want to be dance teachers, some who want to be on the stage, some want to do other kinds of things with dance.

In 1982, Iantha cofounded the Black College Dance Exchange, when Inez Howard from Norfolk State University, Nancy Pinckney from North Carolina Central University and Cora Saltzburg from Virginia State University decided to host a dance festival at the college level for African-American students. The Black College Dance Exchange (BCDE) has grown to include as many as twenty participating schools from historically Black colleges and universities around the country. Iantha has had an active role with BCDE, serving as President from 1999-2002.

> And this forum that we have here, at the Black College Dance Exchange gives them some opportunities to see what's there and helps spur them on in their desires, and how people who may not be sure at first, but are really interested, they are really interested in dance.

The Fountain of Youth

When I asked Iantha if she considers herself to be a dancer, choreographer or teacher, she replied without hesitation that she is all three. "I'm the principal choreographer for our dance ensemble at Morgan State and have been for twenty eight, no twenty nine years. I'm also an educator, because I teach about dance. So, I'm all three." She explained that although she does not perform professionally anymore, at the age of 68 years young, Iantha still looks forward to tap dancing in local dance recitals.

> I have become an avid tap dance person. And I've taken tap dance lessons and performed with little tap dance schools... But it's so much fun to just get back on stage, and it feels good to get on stage, no matter what. It's so much fun to dance, it feels good. Dance is a part of life. I have always felt that. I will always do some kind of dance. I am enjoying country line dancing. I'm going to a country line dance every Wednesday night....and I am free. And you get out there and learn and do all of those dances, which are fun! And they're great exercise. They keep your brain moving, they stimulate your mind, not just your body. You have to remember all the steps. I think dance is a vital part of life. It keeps you young. Dance is still a major part of my life as vocation and avocation. If you stop dancing, you get moldy. I don't ever intend to get moldy.

Preserving History

Teaching today's youth about the struggles African Americans had to endure in the past is one way that Dr. Tucker uses the medium of dance. She knows the importance of maintaining the history of African Americans and honoring the

legacies for their influence in creating dance, as we know it today. As a dance educator, Iantha feels that her mission is

> To give my students as much knowledge about the influences of African Americans in dance. As well as the things that give us the impetus for some of the dances that we do. So, you're imparting a lot of information...a lot of history in that you utilize, let's say, the pioneers in dance that went before, the techniques that they developed. You're going back in history with that and you're telling your students about that. Being aware of the contributions of the legendary pioneers in dance can serve as an inspiration to the students of today.
>
> In Africa, dance permeated every aspect of life, from birth to death. There was dance for every occasion. Dance on the plantation was at the will of the owner, for the most part. Only after work was done could the slave relax and move their bodies in a similar fashion to the old ways. However, you must remember, there were no drums allowed and so slaves clapped their hands, stomped their feet, used their bodies as percussive instruments, used wash boards, jugs, chicken bones, etc., to help make rhythms and music.

A Vehicle of Expression

Dance is also an effective vehicle for expressing social issues. Iantha admits that we do it all the time through dance, although we don't always realize it until the piece is done.

> You see the piece and you go, wow! That has something to say. I know that in the early years, there were dancers who did dances of protest...like Pearl Primus, about the inequities of life for African Americans, in American society. It is one of the ways. There are a lot of different ways-it's done through art, it's done through music, and it's been done through dance, and it's an important way of doing it. Because you can get away with stuff when you do it through the arts that you can't get away with if you were talking, and so people are able to have their artistic expressions and use that artistic

> expression to protest or to show their feelings about something, and it can rarely be held against you. You know?

Religious Ties

In addition to using dance to make social and political statements, dance may be a way to tell stories, which follows in the African tradition of story telling. Although Iantha relates historical events in her dances, what is of interest is that she uses religious songs to inspire her choreography. The African-American experience is strongly connected to religious ties that go back in time to the days of slavery.

> I like to tell the story, in some of my dances of...slavery...of the rigors of plantation living, and emancipation kinds of things. And I have two main dances that I perform over the years. The first one I call "Genesis II," and that one talks about the capture of the African American slaves from the lantation to emancipation. And in its synopsis it tells us, 'With our freedoms, we now, our hopes are in our children to keep us going on.'
>
> I have another dance, which is a religious suite, and in that one I use religious music and songs, some of which were relating to...like, the underground railroad and also freedom, in my particular segment. It starts with, *"Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child," "A Long Way From Home,"* (and by that I mean a long way from Africa), and it goes from there into "*Go Down Moses, Let My People Go'* (talking about giving us freedom again). From there it goes *"Swing Low Sweet Chariot, Comin' For to Carry Me Home"* (and that's a runaway slave song...was a symbol that was used when slaves were trying to run away and used the underground railway to get to freedom).
>
> "*Joshua Fought the Battle of Jericho*" is the next one, and for me is freedom, emancipation, the walls come tumbling down, we're not slaves anymore. And the final one is, "*Come on Children, Let's Sing"* which is saying we no longer have the boundaries, we can achieve and reach some of our goals. So those are my little kinds of dances of protest. Then I do other kinds of

> things, you know, pas de deux, and you know, other kinds of movement using all kinds of music… But those are the two main things I do.

Inspiration

Iantha utilizes her choreography to tell stories, impart history, make statements and express joy. Although her intention, to relate the history of African Americans during slavery, influences some of her choreography, she is also inspired by the music she hears. She admits that she is influenced by many things when creating a piece.

> Sometimes, I'll create a piece in my head…and then I'll go find the music. Um…I can remember doing one dance where…I had the dancers doing what I wanted them to do, and while I was doing that…and then I sent someone to the store to get the music…because I had heard this music on the radio. On occasion, I've had students bring a piece of music that they thought was really neat, and I liked it. And that turned out to be some good influences, as well. There are a lot of things that give me influence.

One of those influences comes from taking dance class. When Iantha was studying dance in New York at the Ailey studio, she was taught the Horton technique, a dance technique that Alvin Ailey used and that is still being used with his dancers. She claims that she is bound by that style and incorporates it into her choreography without even thinking about it.

> While I was in New York, working on my doctorate, I spent many hours at the Ailey studio, and other studios, taking classes and performing in their studio performances. I just enjoyed every aspect of that. And of course, that has as influence on me. I love Horton technique, which is one of the

> dance forms taught at the Ailey studio, as well as a few other places. And so, I use a lot of Horton in my works, as well. Sometimes I don't realize I'm using it until after I see it, and then I realize that's what I'm using, that I am really bound into that dance style.

Iantha made the decision not dance professionally, but to teach and choreograph. "And I chose to choreograph. And do all of the things that I've been doing, that's what I chose to do. And I've enjoyed doing it."

Pleasure in Creating

Iantha admits that her choreography has changed a lot over the years, with some elements remaining the same. She feels that her works have not only grown but matured as well. She sees a more mature style in her pieces.

> One of the greatest feelings is to see your work on stage. To sit there and watch what you've created and to get pleasure out of it. Of course, they're not all perfect, but then we don't do them anymore, we'll never do that again. But, some well, live through the ages and are appropriate no matter what period of time. The finished product can be very satisfying because you can see it. The dance develops as you're doing it. And what you start out with as an idea at first, may change as you're going along, and that's part of the process in choreography, and I think that's important.

Reaching Out

As far as the audience is concerned, she wants them to enjoy her work. Iantha hopes to reach out to her audience with at least one piece of her work that inspires them in some way.

> I hope they like it. I hope they enjoy seeing what they do. When I do my concerts, I hope to incorporate a lot of a variety of dance styles and so I will use a lot of variety of choreographers along with mine. I will also use something that has a ballet background someone that has tap, lyrical, African-base. What I'm trying to do is touch everyone in the audience with at least one dance. So they will get a wide range of things, so that if they like one better than the other because it's a ballet or romantic duet. I try to give a well-rounded program so they see a lot of different things. I don't think my audiences are extremely sophisticated to say that they want to go see a full-length ballet or something of that nature of that style. And so I try to fit all of it.

As an audience member, Iantha likes to enjoy the dance, as well. Although she believes that dance is one way to express social issues, she doesn't preconceive what the choreographer's statement may be based on their political or social stance.

> I don't think I want to pull anything apart in that way. When you look at the dance, when I look at a dance, I like to enjoy the dance. And then after I've seen it, I can think about the different elements, the different aspects, and I'll say, wow. They were really saying something about...But I want to see the dance. I don't want to go in as a critic looking at all the different pros and cons. I want to see it and then I reflect on it.

Drawing from the Past

Iantha believes the dances of the past are reflected in the dances of the present. Looking at the dances that originated in Africa reveals similarities of movements performed in many dances of today. These commonalities are what is known as the Black aesthetic.

> Oh, you know, they say, "the more things change, the more they remain the same." Things go in circles or cycles. Take for example, the early 80s had the beginning of break dancing, all that. I remember seeing some videos of the early 1900s, or the late 1800s where people from Africa were doing the things that these break dancers were doing in 1980. It had just come full
>
> cycle again. And that's what happens. If you go back in history, you'll see some of the same things...transformed...or made different in some ways. But you can see that element is still there. That's probably what we mean by the Black aesthetic.
>
> That element may be a little different from the original, but it still comes through... the African dance, the African style. And there are so many different African styles. There is no one African style, depending on the communities, depending on the cultures. The style of music...it's not all drumming in Africa, depending on the region. You've got the koras and you've got other kinds of musical instruments, vibraphones...that dances are related to and so there is a wide range of dances, not just the drums and the athletic dances that people think of as African dance.

As far as important contributions to dance/Black dance, Iantha proclaims, "Everything! Rhythms, qualities. It's embedded in our society and people don't even know it. Not many people will admit that we've influenced so much." The power of dance lies in its ability to bridge the cultural gap, "Dance is so pervasive in our society and it goes across cultural lines."

Her Legacy

Iantha's influence on African-American dance will continue to be present throughout the years to come. She will be remembered by her students for

imparting knowledge about the African-American dance pioneers. She will be remembered for the dances she created which expressed the stories of the African American struggle. She will be remembered for her own efforts as a pioneer dedicated to the Black College Dance Exchange and all of her hard work to preserve the Black dance on the legacy of Black dance in the colleges and universities. In her own words (chuckle):

> I'm a pack rat. I save everything. I have programs from my first concert, have notes, I have everything. My legacy. . .I would want my materials to be able to be seen, so they can understand what I was doing for all these years, and so that what I've done doesn't get lost, because I do think that it does have a place in our dance history. Just because we don't have a major in my school, doesn't mean that there hasn't been a lot going on in dance, at my school. And at the college level, we need to document what has been going on in dance. Because many of our dancers go on to perform or teach or do many other things in dance that we have helped to inspire and to go back. Like you went back and you found my dissertation or just to find themselves in a picture or find their names in a program. That kind of thing is available, and I think that's what I want.

Summary

Iantha is a noted scholar and dance historian on The Role of African Americans in Dance in the United States. She earned a B.A. and B.S. from Morgan State University, where she teaches, and a Ph.D. from New York University. Her dance training includes classes with Buddy Phillips, Syvilla Fort, and Vera Cole, whom Iantha credits as the one who instilled a love of dance within her at an early age. Dance has always been a part of her life, from the first time she stepped into

the dance studio at the age of four until today, at the age of 64. Although she doesn't believe that all African Americans have rhytm or the natural ability to dance, Iantha appears to have been blessed with such a talent. Dance has played a major role in her life, whether taking a class, teaching a class, performing, choreographing, watching a performance, or just dancing socially.

As a professor of dance, Iantha realizes the importance of teaching her students about the African-American dance legends and preserving the legacy. She is an advocate for taking dance out of the physical education department and creating a dance major in historically Black colleges and universities. Iantha utilizes her choreography to impart history, tell stories, make social statements and express joy. In addition to using dance to make social political statements, she uses dance as a way to tell stories. Many of the stories Iantha tells are of a historical nature, but what is of interest is that she uses religious songs to tell these stories. The African-American experience is strongly connected to religious ties that go back in time to the days of slavery.

Dance is an effective vehicle for expressing social issues and Iantha admits that she has several protest pieces. She claims we do it all the time through dance, although we don't always realize it until the piece is done. She is influenced by many things when creating a dance. These influences include history, music, and taking dance classes at the Ailey studio where she learned Horton technique. She claims that she incorporates it into her choreography without even thinking about it.

Iantha enjoys choreographing and feels that her choreography has not only grown but matured through the years, seeing a more mature style in her pieces. One of the greatest feelings for Inatha is to see her work on stage. As far as the audience Members are concerned she wants them to enjoy her work, and hopes to reach out to the audience with at least one piece that inspires them in some way. Iantha is passionate about dance in every way, especially teaching. "Teaching dance has always been a joy for me, I can remember in the early years at Morgan thinking they are paying me to do what I have so much fun doing!"

Dianne Maroney-Grigsby

Background

Dianne Maroney-Grigsby, Artistic Director of Orchesis Dance Company at Grambling State University in Louisiana, has had an impressive career. She is a former member of the Alvin Ailey Repertory Ensemble and Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Dianne performed and taught with the Ailey company from 1973 to 1983. She left Ailey to teach at Grambling State University in Louisiana. Dianne currently teaches at Louisiana Tech University's School of the Performing Arts. She received her B.A. from Brambling State University and M.A. Degree from Louisiana Tech University. In 1993, Dianne was appointed as the Artistic Associate director of the Louisiana Dance Theatre, Shreveport Louisiana's first regional ballet

company. She received "The Living Legend Award" by the Wideman Foundation in 1995.

Dianne is a gifted choreographer whose work exudes passion and humanity. She truly has the capacity to externalize internal emotions through her work. A member of the Black College Dance Exchange, I have known Dianne since 1999. I continue to be amazed by the brilliant choreography her students display at the annual dance exchanges. In 2005, Dianne hosted the 24th Annual Black College Dance Exchange, "Celebrating the Art of Dance" at Grambling State University. It was on the last day of the Black College Dance Exchange that I interviewed Dianne in the hallway of the student union building on April 11, 2005.

Embarking Upon Her Career

Upon receiving a scholarship to study at the Alvin Ailey American Dance Center, Dianne moved to New York in 1973. There she trained with Alvin Ailey, Sylvia Waters, Talley Beatty, Donald McKayle, Ulysses Dove, Tom Stevens, Denise Jefferson and Mel Tomlinson. One year later, she was chosen to be in the Alvin Ailey Repertory Ensemble, a company composed of the most promising scholarship students from the Ailey School. Dianne toured extensively with that company, becoming assistant to Sylvia Waters, artistic director of the ensemble, now called Ailey II. Dianne also performed in Europe, Asia and Africa with the

Alvin Ailey Dance Theater. She stayed with the Ailey company until 1983, as a performer and as an instructor of the Horton technique.

Dianne described the focus of the Ailey School as one to create dancers who were well trained in all of the dance disciplines. Ailey accomplished this by bringing in a variety of choreographers to expose the dancers to many styles.

> I think Alvin's idea was that the dancer should be all-around. The dancer should train in ballet, jazz, African, tap...all of the disciplines. Alvin was very free-hearted and he opened his doors to all choreographers. And if you open your doors to all choreographers, then your company is able to do any style. So, that's what was stressed at the school.

Finding Her Voice

Dianne remembered her first experience teaching at the Ailey School. She was dancing professionally in the company and taking classes nightly with Mel Tomlinson. When the director of the school, Tom Stevens, needed a substitute for Mel's class, Dianne immediately agreed to teach. But she wasn't prepared for what happened.

> I was a company member, and he was running up and down the steps... 'Mel Tomlinson can't teach the class and we need a, we need a substitute teacher to teach the class.' And I said, 'Oh, I'll do it.' Cause I was taking Tomlinson's class every night. And I would go home before I would go to bed, and I would think about all the steps that we did and how he was teaching...his voice. And the first he would do is roll down and then we would do a flat back and soft knee bounces. I would go over that. And so now I had this chance, because I had been practicing, not even knowing that I was preparing myself to teach. I was a sponge, just like I was saying to

> Delores. Ok, so I got in that class, and girl, I froze. I remembered what to do, but I didn't have the power or the voice.
>
> That was scary, and one lady in the back of the room said, 'Scooze me, I can't hear you.' Whew! Girl, that was my first experience teaching my first class. But I got over that quick. I really did.

Make It Real

Although many dancers have studied at the Ailey School, few have studied with the man himself. Dianne had the opportunity to actually work with Alvin Ailey. As she recalled one rehearsal, Dianne's voice became very dramatic, her eyes wide, as she remembered the experience.

> When Alvin was alive...I'll never forget this. That in rehearsal he gave us the image of what we should feel like performing, "Blues Suite" He told us that we were animals in a cage-tigers, animals, lions, tigers in a cage...and we hadn't eaten in days...had no food...And then the door opened. That was it. That's all he had to say...and then the doors opened.

Following in Footsteps

Dianne's work is very influenced by her experience with the Ailey company. She has recreated some of his works for her students at Grambling State University. As a choreographer, Dianne says that she has been told that she's a 'natural.' She begins with an idea and then determines what she will choreograph. Dianne admits that she is greatly inspired by the music. In addition to the music, working with the masters continues to be a source of inspiration for Dianne.

> I usually determine what I would like to choreograph. Um…I guess I could say that the music inspires me…that the music must inspire me in order to choreograph the work. Basically, it's all down to the music. That's my inspiration.
>
> And even when I choreograph, I may say to the girls, if Alvin was here, he would make a cluster right here…or if Ulysses were here, he would do this. I always have theses people right in the back of my mind, who I worked with. You have to…cause they inspired me. You know, Talley, Donald McKayle…

Make It Your Own

How does she create a dance? Dianne listens to the music over and over until it becomes a part of her. It is important for her to learn the music first. Sometimes, she may start choreographing from the ending, or the middle, or the beginning. The process may vary and can even take a while for the concept to work itself out. She took a moment to reflect.

> Sometimes when you choreograph, like I can hear, I can listen to it. 'Cause I've been choreographing for a long time, now…I can listen to the music and sometimes, I have an ending…I can jump in the middle it, and I can hear that and have an idea…and then sometimes, I'll just work from the beginning. Like today we're doing, *As Long as I Got King Jesus.* I was home, and the television was turned on the gospel channel, and I hear this music, right? So I wrote it down and got the music and kept listening to it and listening to it and… I'm not choreographing, yet, I'm just listening, just listening. And it's becoming a part of me. That's what I do. really learn that music, ok?
>
> Then one day, I'll never forget, it was Christmas holiday. I got up, went in the kitchen and I turned the music on and I got my opening statement, just like that.

> It took a while. Yeah. Sure…it doesn't always come. Sometimes, you just have to be patient and eventually it will come.

When the muse finally decides to visit, the dance falls into place. Dianne added that the music often dictates what the movements will be. When she listens to the music, she can envision the steps.

> The girls choreograph and sometimes, they don't listen to the music. 'Cause if you really listen to it, and if that training, I think, ballet, modern and jazz, the more disciplines you've been, you've been exposed to, I think your choreography can be interesting, 'cause you listen to the music. And if things sound like a chaine, you can do that…and if it sounds like a jete, then you're going to jete. So the music kind of dictates what, what movements can be suggested to use.

The process Dianne uses to choreograph has changed through the years. When she was younger, Dianne would physically execute all of the movements, but now at the age of fifty six, she more often visualizes the steps.

> I can see it now. Before, when I was younger, I physically did everything. I made those shapes, but now, I can see it in my head. I can drive my car and come up with ideas.

Reaching Students

Dianne has been teaching dance at Grambling since 1993 and has had a variety of students pass through her doors. As an educator, she wants to reach all of the students and enhance the learning experience regardless of their level.

> I try to choreograph according to the level of my students and I have levels, all levels. I have college kids coming in, not having any experience, and then I have some who've had experience and then I have some with experience, but not quite where it should be, so I try to enhance that, and I try to give to the younger dancer, as well.

Her Legacy

Although she has an extensive background in dance, Dianne remains grounded. She is grateful to the masters for sharing their knowledge with her and she wants to do the same. Dianne's legacy is to impart in her students all of the knowledge she has been given.

> To give back. Cause, that's what we were told-to give back. That's the idea, to reach back and to give back...as so many people have given to me.

Summary

Dianne has had an impressive career as a dancer with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. While with Ailey, she was fortunate to study with the African-American legends in dance and hopes to pass this knowledge onto her students. Dianne is both a gifted choreographer and teacher, receiving distinguished honors for her contributions in dance.

The process she uses to choreograph is as unruly as the muse. Sometimes she starts with the ending, or sometimes the middle, or even the beginning. She is

very inspired by the music she hears and listens to it repeatedly in order to learn it. When Dianne was younger, she would physically dance all of the movements in the studio, but now she can envision steps in her head. Some of her works include dances of a spiritual nature to gospel music; others may have a more theatrical flair. Dianne believes, as she was taught, in the importance of being well versed in all styles of dance. She is an amazing teacher who exudes energy, warmth and love, yet with all of her credits, she remains a humble and genuine person.

Peter Anthony Fields, Jr.

Background

Dr. Peter Anthony Fields, Jr., Chairman of the Gospel Music Workshop of America Liturgical Dance Company, began his own liturgical dance company, The Bethlehem Dance Theatre, while attending Bowling Green State University, where he received his B.A. Dr. Fields continued his studies at Ohio State University, earning an M.A. and doctoral degree from the Union Institute for his dissertation, "The Eclectic Approach of Black Dance." He studied at the Ailey School, with Homer Bryant at Dance Theatre of Harlem, and with James Truitte at Dayton Contemporary Dance Company. Peter currently teaches at Fisk University in Nashville, TN where he is Chairman of the Dramatics and Speech and Dance Department and Director of Orchesis: University Performing Dance Company. In 2004, Peter was the host of the 23rd Black College Dance Exchange. At the April

2007 Executive Board meeting, held at Norfolk State University in Norfolk Virginia, Peter was elected the new President of the Black College Dance Exchange.

Peter made me feel welcome the first time I attended the Black College Dance Exchange in 1999. I had just been hired at Chicago State University and was eager to become part of this great community of talented dancers. After taking Peter's liturgical dance class, I was impressed by his knowledge and teaching command. Shortly after the conference, I accessed Peter's dissertation wanting to know more about his perceptions of the Black dance experience. Several years later, when I asked if he would allow me to interview him for my study, he consented. On April 9, 2005 at the 24th Annual Black College Dance Exchange, I interviewed Dr. Fields in the hallway of the student union building on the campus of Grambling State University in Grambling, Louisiana.

A Fascination with the Arts

Peter Fields' interest in dance began as a student at Roosevelt High School in Dayton, Ohio. He found himself fascinated by the choreography of the high school marching band. When his sister took ballet classes, he would watch her practice and perform in the recitals. Although he had dreams of becoming a school psychologist, he was drawn to the arts and found himself involved in the school choir. Soon he was blocking the choreography for the choir and for the marching band. It was at that point Peter realized that if he wanted to pursue a career he

would enjoy, it would have to be in music and dance. Peter took the dance classes offered within the physical education program in high school but he wasn't serious about it yet.

> Well, I started in high school...actually watching the high school band, Roosevelt High School in Dayton, Ohio. And I was just amazed by the choreography. And that's actually what I was turned on to. My sister was taking ballet classes at the center, so I would watch her come home and practice and I would go to her recitals. And then, I was watching the high school band and I was like, wow...and not thinking that I would ever do this...And then I found myself in the arts. I was in the choir and as time went on, I found myself blocking things for the high school band.

When asked why they chose a career in dance, some people believe they were chosen to follow this path. Others reply that they simply cannot imagine doing anything else. Dr. Fields made the choice to pursue dance to have a career he would enjoy for the rest of his life.

> So from listening to my high school counselor, 'Look Fields, you want to do something that you're going to enjoy doing for the rest of your life, when you pick your career.' And that somehow, just kept ringing in my head. No matter what classes I was taking, I always found myself getting in some movement classes or theater class or a singing or music class. And then I would start suggesting things to my church, I would always do something different for the choir. And then I went to college.

Making Up Time

Peter enrolled at Bowling Green State University in psychology, but soon changed his major to dance. He furthered his training by taking dance classes at the

Alvin Ailey Dance Center in New York.

> Remember, I said I wanted to be a school psychologist (chuckle). And so this went on until I went to college. And then, I kept hearing what my advisor had said in high school, and that's when I started taking all the dance classes, I switched my major, I went to New York, I started taking classes at the Ailey school. And I said, boy I wasted a year, because I was in psychology. I wasted time...I have a lot of time...I have to make up time. But it seems like things started to fall in place, you know, of course. I started taking those classes and I took my ballet classes, in New York from Homer Bryant, who was from Dance Theatre of Harlem, I think he's now in Chicago. And James Truitte, who was with DCDC (Dayton Contemporary Dance Company) and then my professors at the school. And so it added another year to my undergraduate work, but I just said, fine.

The Liturgical Movement

Peter completed his Bachelor of Arts at Bowling Green State University, where he became involved in the liturgical movement of dance. That was where he made the connection with The Gospel Music Workshop of America.

> Then I connected with liturgical movement because I talked to the Dean of the Academic Division of the Gospel Music Workshop of America, Dr. Robert Simmons....because I wanted to introduce liturgical movement to the Dayton chapter...So that was falling in line.

Peter began his own liturgical dance company, The Bethlehem Dance Theatre, while a student at Bowling Green State.

> And I said, if I can do this in my professional life, I can also do this in my Christian life. And not trying to bridge anyone's religious freedom...I don't care if you're Baptist, Methodist, Episcopalian, Presbyterian...I don't care. We can move. So that's how that component started. ....And so I just

> started from there, and kept studying, and went all over. And so then, I finished my degree at Bowling Green State University. I went on to Ohio State and finished there in '85, and got my masters... their Master of Arts program that I went through is now their Master of Fine Arts. I decided to go on. I started teaching at Fisk and then went back to school to get my Ph.D.

Making the Connections

Peter earned his doctoral degree at the Union Institute in Cincinnati with his dissertation entitled, "The Eclectic Approach of Black Dance." Currently, Dr. Fields is the Chairman of the Gospel Music Workshop of the American Liturgical Dance Company. While working on his dissertation, Peter learned to make the connections between dancing and why people dance. Peter realized that when people move, there is a reason that causes them to do so. It can be emotional or spiritual but there is a reason.

> I had an informal session with Dr. Ruth Dennis, who was a sociologist in Nashville. I had invited a couple of students over to my home and she was going to explain different spiritual aspects of things in reference to movement and in her area of sociology. Now she said, your dissertation is in this area, so it's going to connect. So when you go to your studio and you're trying to connect... there's an issue, a life issue. Even if you're dancing for joy, there's something causing you to move. You may not have a theme behind it, but there's something that causes you to be happy. Or say that it's a love affair and you're dancing about that...you're expressing that, so that's coming out.
>
> That's your experience. And now you go back and you dig, and you choreograph the feelings that you have had. And then I got a better interpretation of the movement and being a serious choreographer. Looking at life's situations.

Inspired by Life

A choreographer may be inspired by music or feelings. Peter finds that many of the dances he creates are from life experience. It may be a situation in which he was personally involved or became aware by observing others. The act of choreography is not an arbitrary act. It is purposeful and intentional. Peter states that there is always a reason why the choreographer creates a dance.

> I heard one of my students speaking to another student. And in the midst of just hearing that little bit...I stopped and something just hit me in the head. That night I went home and I started pulling out music from my different collections, and I choreographed a piece, in a jazz form and I set it up as if they were in a club. I do believe in listening.
>
> *Girls Night Out* brought up a lot of issues. Some people who had been through it or their parents had been through it. And what was ironic, some had never even been resolved... and when I had the lights fading out and the movement was going on, people felt like, we want an answer. And I said, maybe I need to back to the studio, and to this day, it's inside of me. I don't think it's been answered. Inside of me, and when I had that talk back, and we're sitting there, everyone's discussing the issue...oh boy, this must be big. I don't...People mess around all the time. And you really hurt people, you really do.

Communication

Peter believes that through dance, we can express feelings and communicate thoughts. His choreography is always based on an issue or feeling that he wishes to depict. For Peter, there is always a reason someone expresses himself or herself through dance. He likes to challenge himself and his dancers with his work. What

is important to Peter is that the work makes sense. "Does it have a thesis statement, an opening, a conclusion?" Peter was so shaken by the Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas Senate hearings, he used dance as a way to respond to his feelings. Peter expresses disbelief and communicates that in his piece, *Sweet Hill.*

> Yes, there is a reason. Right. Yes, if something...Ok. Let me tell you, I have a piece in my repertoire, uh, about the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas situation and it's called *Sweet Hill.* When that hit the fan, I was just blown away. Uh, huh. I was just blown away. I watched that whole courtroom – and afterwards, in order to get that off me, I went into the studio and choreographed a *duet* and it was called *Sweet Hill.* And we ended up dancing that piece for half a year...at the school. I believe there's a reason behind everything. So, if you're inspired to write lyrics, you start writing the words. That's how the musicians come up with the lyrics for their music. Our thing is to go into the studio and express what's happening. And you communicate that.

Understanding

Peter feels it is important for the audience to understand his work. He believes the dance must make sense and have a thesis statement, and an ending to it. One way Peter makes certain the audience understands his work is to provide program notes with the dances. Because many of the pieces he does express real life issues, he also has a talk-back after the performance to provide the opportunity to discuss these issues and make sense of them. He encourages his students to do the same when choreographing their own pieces.

I only have four pieces in my concert. And that's an evening. If that concert starts at eight o'clock, they're out by nine thirty, with those four pieces. So…I know we're charged to train our campus, too and your community.

But when you go to a professional concert, they don't have but three or four. See what I'm saying? So, that's all we have is four pieces in my concert and then they have a program note so they have something to read it. Now they're thinking one way when they read it, but when they see it, it might be a totally different piece. So I want them to understand what's happening.

So like with *The Girls Night Out*, once they did that, with that particular piece in order to help the audience understand, I know they read the program note, but what I did is…during the intermission, I select music that's going to be played during the intermission that's going to be in reference to whatever's next. So during the intermission, I played a certain song that lead to what was going to happen. The curtains were already open and now the stage is set up like a club. And as my dancers got prepared, then they would start walking out on the stage and sit on a bar stool or maybe pick up, like they had a cocktail. Now, the people are like, oh, it's already started. Like that, and then they'd be sitting there talking to someone and then oh, the curtain's open.

When I have my talk back…my concert is Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, ok. So then, on Monday when I have my talk back…that *Girls Night Out* brought up a lot of issues. Some people who had been through it or their parents had been through it. And what was ironic, some had never even been resolved… and when I had the lights fading out and the movement was going on, people felt like, we want an answer. And I said, maybe I need to back to the studio, and to this day, it's inside of me. I don't think it's been answered. Inside of me, and when I had that talk back, and we're sitting there, everyone's discussing the issue…oh boy, this must be big. I don't…People mess around all the time. And you really hurt people, you really do.

The Audience

Although Peter may choreograph abstract works, it is still important to him that the audience understand what he is trying to express. He believes that it is

important the dance makes sense.

> I have...abstract pieces. And sometimes the audience will understand it... sometimes they won't. That piece that we did last night...that's a liturgical piece, but it's an abstract liturgical piece. So what throws a person off, that it's in the church...but they don't understand the music. What they're looking for here is something about Jesus and clapping of the hands and it's not that way. So, I would place that piece as a classical piece for a liturgical group. But in a modern abstract piece, they have all types of shapes and forms. So there, you see, I give program notes. Besides having all the credits, I give a program note so that, ok, this is what we're getting ready to view.

Speaking Out

Peter agrees that dance is an effective way to speak out about issues that plague our society. Whether the artist uses the dance, music, or art studio to create a work in the space, on vinyl, or on canvas, the artist uses current events to express these issues. He believes that dance is a good medium to express social issues and has choreographed dances to make a political statement. Even if change does not come from the statement, just say it.

> Yes, because sometimes we have to...if there's a political issue, you can do it from the stage. You can do it from the stage. Yes. I'm trying to think of one of my pieces. It's called, *In the Park with Mattie* and it's about homeless people. It was a jazz piece. They had a sign, "Dance for Food." I saw a homeless person holding a sign. And his sign said, "I Just Want a Beer. I'm Being Honest." That's what it said at the bottom. And that's what made me go into the studio and so I put, "Dance for Food." And I had waste baskets and garbage cans. We bought clean garbage cans and filled them up with clothes and newspaper. We had park benches and everything. And we played Natalie Cole's "Pink Cadillac." And they came out like homeless people and danced. It was a jazz piece, it was upbeat, but it had a message

> behind it. And then we had "Dance for Food." How do we solve that issue? Or Eleo Pomare, he has a dance about drugs. So you see, yes, I think, artists can go into their room in their area. Either in their studios or it's their canvases in their art studios...or their music studios, and whatever's happening at that time, they put it together. What about the song, "We Are the World?"

The Heart of the Artist

Some people may say that they are born with the creative spirit. Others may feel a spiritual force that guides them in their work. One cannot deny that artists are very unique beings. There is something just a little bit different about artists, that sets them apart from the crowd. Peter believes that there is something very special about the heart of the artist.

> Well, I do believe that everyone has that gift of creativity. But I think the creative arts, that we...are hearts...there's something about the heart of the artist. Because everyone has creativity, because if not, we would just get up and all dress the same way everyday. You see, we'd just get up and put on the same clothes and you wouldn't see anything. But there's something about the artist. You can tell at an audition, if that's a true artist before you, or they just have the love of the art. Because there's something different about the way they present themselves. And they're communicating that way.

Digging Deep

A good researcher, writer, and artist all recognize the importance of being a skilled observer. As an educator Peter trains his students to develop this skill, create an image, and then transfer that image into movement. He encourages them to write about their feelings by digging deep into their inner selves.

> The students at Fisk have to observe...they have to keep a journal. We have to help them to train the eye to see so you can see a picture. So once that imagery comes into your head, then how do you take that imagery out of the head and put it onto the body. I want them to feel...if they feel anything. Write what you feel and then start moving. They have to listen to their inner selves.

Dance Is Life

Some people believe in the dance of life, that life is a dance and that everyone is a dancer. But for the dancer as an artist, there is no choice. To dance is to live – to live is to dance. Peter believes that the choreographer draws upon life experience, intentionally or unintentionally, to create dance compositions.

> Oh, you know, sometimes you can go into the room and just move. But even in the midst of doing that, because, I really feel...those people say that they're just choreographing and they don't know what's going on...there's something that's happening in their life at that time. Cause there's no way in the world we can get by it. Dance is life and in order to live you must move. That's a dance and even when we're not moving, that's a dance, because you're still moving.

Spirituality

Peter's choreography is informed by a deep spirituality, which is the force behind his work. He spoke of the significance of religion in African dance and how each movement is symbolic.

> Movement lies in the eighth order of the angels. The energy, the heat...when God blew that breath within us, that's the start of it. God blew his breath within us...that heat that you feel is the start of when God blew that breath of life within us. hat's the start of it. And if you can feel that warmth, imagine if we were standing in his presence. But the angel who

> taught you to walk after you were shaped was Obatala of the eighth order, and he took one step at a time. And that angel moves very slowly. Those angels in the eighth order, that's the movement process. That's why, now let's jump to pentacostal setting, when people are shouting in church. And you see someone walking very slowly, but they are caught up, they may be caught up in their moving, as some people may call possessed. And they're moving, and they're walking...that's Obatala.

Peter believes everything we do comes from God and that the power of all movement lies in the order of God's angels. He talked about his piece called *Changing Winds* based on the angel Obeyah.

> Because Obeyah, when she sweeps through, she causes you to run. She causes you, she's like the tornadoes. She checks, that's what she oversees. So she sweeps through, all right, now. Have you heard of the song, 'Ezekial Saw a Wheel Way Up in the Middle of the Air?'
> Those are the angels that move in the throne of God. Those angels, that eighth choir, that's the movement process. All of them, the way they run, they cause us to run...all of those angels have a movement pattern.

Peter states that, "dance has always been recognized as an important aspect of black life and as a central element in African-American religion."

> We danced our services. Let's go back to Africa. Our services started with just a praise of movement... There's nine choirs of angels and in that eighth order, that's where movement lies.
>
> So these angels that live in the eighth order...what I try to do is explain from the beginning of time, before we went through that slave period, before the missionaries went over to Africa, when they came down in the city of Elethe, that's in the region of Nigeria. That's how the cities were of Heaven and earth. It was just like this and you could walk right in. Have you heard the song, 'Ezekial Saw a Wheel Way up in the Middle of the Air?' You ever heard that song? Well, that's a set of angels. It looks like a wheel. It's round like this. Here's the wheel, here and there's another one right there.

> Those are the angels that move the throne of God. And they moved Him, but their location is in Nigeria. And it's Elethe, that's the city the angels came in through.

Peter pointed out that the angels' movement in the pattern of a wheel influenced the African circle in dance.

> And in African dance, we form a circle... and sometimes, in church settings...they start shouting...and someone will put him in the circle.... Those angels, that's the movement process. So when you see African dance class, you observe the class, you observe the movement.

Storytelling

In the African tradition of story telling, stories are handed down from person to person or by the griot. These stories are not recorded, they must be told. Perhaps it was no coincidence when Peter hosted the 23rd Annual Black College Dance Exchange, the professional performing company was The Garth Fagan Dance Company. In the tradition of African story telling, Garth Fagan does not allow anyone to take written notes or record his work during class. While still working on his dissertation, Peter had an unusual experience while recording an interview.

> I told her (the interviewee) that I'd be recording the session, and she said ok. And she laughed. Well, I wondered why she laughed. ...the tape kept running, just like your tape is running...and nothing recorded.

The above experience left such an impression on Peter that when he

continued to conduct his interviews, he respected a participant's request not to be recorded.

> I had a series of interviews...and he said he'd share the information with me, share some movements with me. But he asked me not to record. Like the African tradition of story-telling...with that folklore. He said not to record it. And I said I would honor your request.
>
> In my dissertation, I talk about it. My first chapter in my dissertation is about voodoo to understand where Katherine Dunham was coming from. I had to bring it back further to have a better understanding of it. So that's how that link started getting to the other side. But there were certain things that said don't do it.

While in Haiti, Dunham lived and shared the lives of the people. She found the dances to be religious, ceremonial, ritualistic, and social. Dunham discovered the dances served the psychological function of externalizing personal feelings as a means of communication and expression. Dunham was an artist who studied culture through the lens of a dancer.

> Even when I did the piece that represents Katherine Dunham dealing with Vaudun, I explained to my students...because I didn't want to scare them. When they set some of those pieces on the Ailey Company, of Katherine Dunham, they were scared of them and they were scared of the situation.

On a personal note, I had the same type of experience when trying to record noted African dance historian, Kariamu Welsh. She was lecturing at the 26th Annual Black College Dance Exchange held at Norfolk State University. I had my

micro cassette recorder running but it kept shutting itself off and would not record. I took notes as fast and furiously as I could, not wanting to miss a word.

Foundation in Dance

Although Peter took classes at the Ailey School, he never had to opportunity to train with Ailey, himself. He was fortunate to study Horton Technique with James Truitte, and ballet with Homer Bryant. These were not only positive learning experiences for Peter, but provided a strong technical foundation in dance.

> Ailey allowed his dancers to express their personalities. Not like some ballet companies. You know. If you don't look like Balanchine...you're not getting in there. Well, he had different personalities. I think that's what turned me on to the modern side of it.
>
> No, I never had class with him. He was always on tour. James Truitte was teaching. He was teaching and Homer was teaching. I went up for the intensive dance sessions. They would be intensive. And Homer Bryant taught the ballet class. James Truitte was teaching the Horton class. It was real intense. I remember James stepping on my leg, sitting in fourth position on that floor.
>
> So when I went to New York, what I didn't like was everyone trying to get the teacher's attention. I just wanted to go and learn. I think that's why James Truitte stepped on my leg, because I wasn't trying to jump in the front. I stayed right in the middle or even in the back. And when he found out I was from the Dayton area, and he worked with Dayton Contemporary, he started using me as a demonstrator in the class.

His Legacy

As a dance educator, Peter wants his students to understand the

reasons they move. "To provide a better understanding of not just the dance, but the spiritual aspect of the movement, whether it's liturgical, African or modern...that you have a better understanding of what makes you move." This belief comes from his religious background and belief that all movement comes from God. For Peter, the creative force that works through the artist comes from above.

Summary

Dr. Peter Fields, Chairman of the Gospel Music Workshop of America Liturgical Dance Company, President of the Black College Dance Exchange, and Professor of Dance at Fisk University, is very active in the dance world. His education includes earning a BA at Bowling Green State University, an MA at Ohio State University, and a Ph.D. at the Union Institute.

Peter has always had a fascination with the arts, becoming interested in dance while in high school. He enjoyed watching his sister practice ballet and perform in her dance recitals. But what intrigued Peter most was the intricate choreography of the high school marching band. Already a member of the choir, he created choreography for the choir and soon found himself blocking for the band.

When asked why he chose a career in dance, Peter thought back to his school counselor. Peter decided to pursue a career in dance to do something he would enjoy the rest of his life. Beginning rather late in life, Peter had to make up for time. In addition to his classes at Bowling Green State University, he furthered

his training at the Ailey School in New York. Peter received a solid foundation in Horton technique and ballet.

While at Bowling Green, Peter began his own liturgical dance company, The Bethlehem Dance Theatre. Peter's spiritual connection is very deep; he professes that everything we do comes from God. Peter believes that the power of dance lies in the order of God's angels and that is the force behind his work. He spoke of the importance of dance as a central element in African-American religion and the similarities of African dance and the circular movement of the angels.

As an instructor and choreographer, Peter is inspired by life experiences. He draws on situations that have impacted not only his students but society as well. The process he uses is much like that of a literary composition with a thesis statement, a beginning, middle, and ending. It is important to Peter, for the audience to understand his work and for his students to have a dialogue about it. Reflecting on life creates meaning, but it is the heart of the artist that provides the true essence of the art.

Joan Hamby Burroughs

Background

Dr. Joan Hamby Burroughs has an extensive background in dance. She earned a B.A. at Tuskegee University, M.S. at Indiana University, and Ph. D. at

New York University in Dance Anthropology. Joan completed her dissertation, "Haitian Ceremonial Dance on the Concert Stage: The Contextual Transference and Transformation of Yanvalou" in 1995. She studied with Leticia Williams, Margaret Cheniere, Arthur Hall, Ann Ashton, Laura Knox, and African-American dance legends Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus. Joan is the former Director of Orchesis Dance Theatre and Professor at Florida A & M University in Tallahassee, Florida. In 2002, Joan hosted the 21st Annual Black College Dance Exchange, "Living Legends: Bridging Our Ancestral Past." She considers herself a dancer, a teacher and a choreographer, although she gives more significance to her years as an educator.

I first made the acquaintance of Joan when she hosted the Black College Dance Exchange at Florida A & M University. Although I was aware that I was in the presence of the great African-American living dance legends, such as Katherine Dunham, Eleo Pomare, Jean-Leon Destine and Jawole Zollar, I had no idea at that time that I would be impacted by this event for the rest of my life. It was at this very dance exchange when I realized my need to research African-American dance. As I began to investigate, I found that the research on African-American dancers, choreographers and educators was limited. Wanting to make a contribution in this area, I began my study.

Two years later at the 23rd Annual Black College Dance Exchange Directors' meeting, I spoke with Joan about my project. She kept making reference

to the term "Sakofa – understanding the past to inform the present." I knew that I needed to explore this concept further and asked Joan if she would allow me to interview her for my study to which she consented. I felt drawn to this woman and was excited about the opportunity to speak with her. The interview took place on April 3, 2004 on the campus of Fisk University in the student union building.

A Fated Path

While some individuals dream of becoming dancers and struggle to make this dream a reality, others believe that it is in their destiny. I understood when Joan talked about having a fated path, as I also followed a path which seemed to have been designed just for me.

> You know, I knew that I liked dance but I had no clear idea. It just kind of happened in my life. Somebody told me once, that some people have prearranged...that people's lives are fated. I had a fated path.

Joan grew up in Birmingham, Alabama where she was surrounded by music and dance in her home. Joan's grandmother was a musician, her parents enjoyed social dance and her aunt taught her dance movements. It is not surprising that a home filled with music and dance would inspire young Joan to become a dancer.

> I always wanted to dance. My mother said that when I was a baby, that anytime my feet touched any surface I would dance. My grandmother said that I was a dancing baby.

Resentment

Growing up in Birmingham in the 1950s during a period of segregation, Joan was unable to take dance classes because formal training was unavailable at that time for African-American children. Joan always wanted to dance but didn't study formally until she was in her teens because, "There were no opportunities at that time, for Black children to study dance." So she would pass by Corky Bell's dance studios and peek in the windows and watch the White children taking tap and ballet classes.

> I wanted so desperately. But there was no one to teach me, and with segregation and all, it was prohibited. I learned to dance, my parents taught me dancing in the kitchen. My father would say, 'come and learn how to do this step.' I used to do this...when I'd hear, someone you might know, Sonny Blonden. He's from Birmingham, Alabama. And my father used to go and dance to his music and so I would learn dance steps from my father and mother, things like that.

Feelings of resentment would last a lifetime for Joan. Fueled by growing up in an age of discrimination, these feelings would continue to fester as she grew and later be reflected in her choreography. It wasn't until she went to Tuskegee University during the years of the Civil Rights Movement that Joan studied modern dance with Leticia Williams and folk and social dance with Margaret Chenierre. Although Joan was active in the movement and aware of the power that music had to create social change, she was unaware that African Americans were making an

impact in the dance world. She was also not aware of the dance opportunities available for African-American students.

> I would have gone and tried to study with Ailey when I was young, you know, right out of college, during that time. I didn't even know about those things. I grew up in the age of segregation and then I participated fully, to the full extent in the Civil Rights Movement. I worked with an organization at Tuskegee...I was heavily involved in the Civil Rights Movement from the time that I entered college until I graduated. So my thinking was more for social activism and at that point, dance was just a frivolity. People weren't dancing, at that point, at least not to my knowledge. I didn't know any people, at that point, who were dancing to express social activism.

Marginalized

Joan was very active in the Civil Rights Movement while a student at Tuskegee University. Although she enjoyed taking dance classes, at that time, Joan's focus was on social activism. She belonged to a student organization and even joined a group called The Freedom Singers. Joan was not aware that dance could be used as a form of expression to create social awareness.

> I knew all about the music people-James Weldon Johnson, and all the people who used music that expressed the Black experience. But I didn't know anything about the dancers, because dance has always been so marginalized in western culture. Being on the margins itself, and not being as available to people in the Black communities...and also being looked at as a form of something that's not so highly respected...and the places that it came from in the Black communities-like from the jook joints and from dancing at home. So being marginalized and certainly not prevalent in the western forms that we're familiar with, not in the Black community, at least not in the South, and not where I come from.

Dance has provided a medium for individuals to experience a sense of joy, freedom, power and even transformation. During the years of bondage in this country, dance was not only a physical and emotional outlet for the African-American slave, but a means of control by the slave master. It is regretful that the dance African-Americans enjoyed would come to be viewed as something that was not so highly respected in our society by European-American cultural standards. The African-American dance pioneers had to prove to the modern dance world that the dances performed by African-American dancers were indeed a respected art form.

> It wasn't seen as a high form of anything. It was, you know, like everything, a lot of the things that Black people do was seen as just visceral or a gut reaction or not elevated in any way, you know. Inspired by urges and instincts and not thought. And it was coming from a heritage that had been denounced, kind of not recognized by the public. And a lot of things Black people did...

Preserving the Past

Although Joan knew of the African-American artists who were expressing social issues through music, she was not aware of the work of Pearl Primus and her dances about social injustice. Because of her own lack of knowledge about African Americans in dance while she was growing up, Joan realizes the importance of teaching today's youth about the contributions of these legends.

> I didn't know that. I was in the South and people weren't talking about that. I didn't have the privilege and that's why for me, it's important that people express those things and talk about their lineage in the dance world and who they were taught by. And it's not about bragging. It's about exposure and maintaining the connection. The word 'Sankofa' is meaningful to me, retrieving the past and bringing it with you to where you are, not leaving it back there to be rediscovered all over again. And also it's about maintaining humility, and going forward with some kind of meaning. There's so much history that's been lost, so much information that we don't have because we just didn't say anything.

Negative Stereotypes

Many African Americans have grown up with a false sense of self because European-American culture and the media have portrayed African Americans in a negative manner. Only in recent history has our government removed offensive textbooks and attempted to right the wrongs of the past with affirmative action by implementing quota systems in universities and in the workplace.

> The closest I knew about Africans and African traditions was from Tarzan, so you can imagine what that was like…for me…thinking about that…thinking that was something lower than…It's certainly not where my thinking is today. But having that kind of influence then…so you didn't do African dancing.
>
> I stayed away from African dance for a long time. Everything was measured in how African you can be. It was the same kind of hierarchical thing you get in any other class, but it was more connected to social issues. I know a lot of other people who kind of felt the same way…kind of shunned, shut out. Some of the most negative energy you can get is also from dancers. I know a lot of people who are really good. They've overcome a lot. They know that they've done a lot and sometimes become arrogant.

A Sense of Belonging

After graduating from Tuskegee, Joan performed with a local modern dance company in her hometown of Birmingham. It was during that time that she began studying with Laura Knox, whom Joan credits as being the person who really gave her a focus in dance and made her feel that she belonged. "It made me feel that I belonged." Joan believes that the real power of dance is that, "Dance puts you in a whole different realm, not of defeat, but of possibilities."

> Laura, herself, was a professional ballerina from Chicago. She was a Jewish lady and she was a principal ballerina with a ballet company, there. Miss Knox, herself, was one of those activists. She would bring in artists from New York to work with us or to choreograph. With CETA funding, we were able to bring in about four dancers who had just finished school in Utah, that had a fabulous dance program... These dancers brought all of our levels up. We were doing these different techniques, the things they were strong in, so we could all learn from.... Well, they did Graham...we were doing some Cunningham...Limon Technique... We didn't really have a lot of Horton...But I don't think a lot of people had that... At that time, Blacks didn't get that kind of input.

The experience with Miss Knox broadened Joan's scope of dance by not only having the opportunity to work with guest choreographers that she brought in, but also by hiring dancers for the company who were trained in Graham, Cunningham and Limon techniques. Joan commented that at that time, training in Horton technique wasn't available to them. Their choreography ranged from dances that dealt with human issues to multicultural pieces, but always based on a theme.

Together, Joan and Miss Knox attended the first International Association on Blacks in Dance Conference (IABD) in 1973 at Indiana University. It was at the conference that Joan learned about the great African-American pioneers in dance. She believes it was her fated path that led her to study one summer with Arthur Hall at Duke University. Joan was also able to study with Pearl Primus and Katherine Dunham, making those meaningful connections that are so important to her in maintaining the legacy of black dance. After attending IABD, Joan decided to pursue a Masters' Degree in Physical Education with a concentration in dance at Indiana University. From 1973 to 1975, Joan performed, choreographed and taught dance while working on her degree. Joan recalls being one of few African-American students in the program at that time. But not too far from Indiana University, Katherine Dunham began having summer dance seminars in East St. Louis, IL, which Joan attended for several years.

> My father knew of Katherine Dunham, and I didn't know that until after I had started studying with Miss Dunham. I came home with a t-shirt on and he said, Katherine Dunham! You been working with Katherine Dunham? We used to go to her shows when she would come to Birmingham and when she would go to these different places. So those are the things you just know until something happens, so. I just think it's important for people to know. There's just so much history that's been lost, so much information that we don't have because we just didn't say anything.

Righteous Indignation

Joan's first experience teaching dance in the physical education department at Woodlawn High School, a primarily White school with a small Black population left her bitter. Once again, Joan was confronted by the harsh reality of racial discrimination. It is not surprising that Joan's dances reflected the anger she held inside as a reaction to the race hatred she experienced.

> I started teaching in a high school, a White school, Woodlawn High School, in which dance was in the physical education department. And because I had a little exposure with that and the African music, I tried to teach a little of that, the postures and everything. But I was not met with a great deal of favor at Woodlawn, but I was good at what I did. They had a Black population, but that was also with the advent of forced integration. We also had the beginning of what they called special ed, they didn't call it segregation.
>
> I had more than resentment inside me, so my choreography ranges the full, I guess, emotions. I remember when there was a lot of emphasis was on South Africa. I was in New York, then and I choreographed a piece that was powerful. And the teachers in the high school, Jewish, Italian...everybody greeted me. Now that was an angry piece. They were like, why'd you do that? I'm very candid. I don't bite my tongue about injustices. I don't bite my tongue about racial difference. And I don't bite my tongue about what I perceive as being wrong or right.
>
> Well, I have to tell you the truth. I think it's not only in one way, but in many. When I say, I must have had a lot of resentment in me. But it's true, and it's something that I always have to deal with. I have to always know that part of everything I do is affected by what I perceive to be hatred, race hatred, you know.

Meaning Is Everything

Joan was very much influenced by the spirituality of dance legend Katherine Dunham. Although Joan never had the opportunity to perform with Katherine Dunham's Company, she spoke of her experience with Miss Dunham. According to Joan, meaning was of primary importance in Miss Dunham's teaching and choreography.

> Like this week, I was in New Orleans watching a Dunham dance. It brings out a certain kind of energy and spirit in your body, just watching it does that to me. 'Cause I think she's just a very spiritual kind of person, she is very much in tune with the universe.
>
> Oh, yeah. I think for Miss Dunham, meaning is everything. But she doesn't get stuck. Meaning is ever changing. Meaning, she holds all...like the Sankofa thing, she does that. But whenever she teaches, she doesn't just let you just go and dance and enjoy yourself. And I found out...I guess I just kind of internal...when I take dance classes I just go in here...I go inside myself. And I guess it's a very selfish mode...Miss Dunham doesn't let you really...She'll put you in that state if she's guiding you through some kind of meditation, or guiding you through an improv or something. But she likes for you to be aware of everything around you. She won't let people come in there and just get off on their own movement.

Joan also pointed out the mistaken belief that African dance is a free style form of dance. Every movement and step has a particular meaning in African dance.

> The things Katherine Dunham did and all the Cuban work...all that stuff has meaning. Those are our traditions, she choreographed based on things that she saw and experienced in the African diaspora community. For example, a lot of people think when they're taking Caribbean dance or African dance forms, they can just kind of free style. But she doesn't.

Katherine Dunham taught at the Black College Dance Exchange in 2002, when Joan Burroughs hosted it at Florida A & M University. Joan recalled that day, with Miss Dunham conducting a master class for hundreds of students from her wheelchair. Her assistant, Theo Jamison, demonstrated the movements while Miss Dunham instructed the musicians stopping them until (Joan and I commented in unison), "she heard exactly what she wanted to hear."

> You know the metal, the instruments they play...she has the class start with drums...if there is the rhythm present, and if there wasn't, and she would just stop the class. And you would just have to wait until they would get their metal in there. She knew what she wanted to hear. She knew how it had to sound. And it had to be correct. And so she kind of holds tradition on that part, but she's also flexible enough to embrace new things.

Crossing Cultures

When I asked Joan if she felt that dance was able to cross cultural boundaries, she responded that as a teacher, she can communicate to other cultures through dance. She was suddenly filled with exuberance as she recalled a fond teaching experience where the students overcame cultural, racial, and social boundaries.

> Can I tell you my best experience with that? It was in New York, one summer. I was teaching folk dancing and square dancing, not modern, but modern dance does it, too. This class was phenomenal. I had Haitian kids who spoke Creole and English...I had Costa Ricans who spoke very little English. And the Costa Ricans and the Dominicans don't get along at all. And even you'd have a couple from India or something, you know....And somehow I managed to teach them folk dance....It was fun though because

> there was just enough communication going on so everybody could learn all of the cues in English....And they learned it cooperatively and with each other, and they didn't mind dancing together with people from different cultures.
>
> I'm always looking into other cultures seeing how I can learn something about what they do and usually it's through their dancing. And then I can communicate, because I can't speak to them. I can do what they're doing and usually I'm accepted in other cultures because of that, because of the dancing that I do with them.

Working Together

Joan believes that dance is a good medium for people to overcome social issues. Through dance, people can have a meaningful interaction by working together cooperatively. She also feels that dance is sometimes the only form of expression that allows people to see social issues.

> It's a good medium, certainly for people to overcome social issues. Just shut your mouth. You just shut your mouth and cooperate with each other. You know, at least find some way that you can create another kind of meaningful interaction.

Joan credits the concept of Black dance as a way not only to raise social consciousness but to bridge the racial gap. Besides bringing races and cultures together, dance can be empowering and give one a sense of identity and connection. With the popularity of the hip-hop culture, many teens may believe they are making that connection, "more people want to dance Black." While hip-hop is crossing the cultures, "the kids doing it don't necessarily understand the movements that

they are doing." What she sees happening now is that the people promoting hip-hop culture are just concerned with generating money.

> They might want to tell you, well this is African, but no. Where you're taking something from is as important as the product that you get, right? So, if you're not coming from a perspective of whatever, with high ideals, then what you're doing to me, is going to be low work. Hip-hop also carries with it a negative connotation coming out of a gang orientation. It was just ghetto kids using other ghetto kids so they could create a market for themselves, and then they go on television and become television stars, with the lowest social morals that anybody could think of.

Her Legacy to the Dance World

Joan is a very determined person who in spite of adversity has managed to overcome many obstacles to achieve success in the dance world. Although she grew up in an age of discrimination, she has learned to be open and accepting of others.

> So for me, I think the most important thing, other than, I know I've had people influenced by my...and I'm not trying to...and I guess that's why I'm here. I'm happy that I can see things more...and so I'm more than just bi-cultural. And I'm more than just Black-White consciousness. I'm also multi-cultural, but I see it from a black perspective. And it makes me appreciate other people's things because I know how much the cultures and traditions of my ancestors have been suppressed.

Summary

Joan believes that it was a fated path that lead her to a career in dance. Joan admits that she always loved to dance and was encouraged by her family's interest in music and dance. Although Joan wanted to study as a child, segregation in the

South deterred her dreams until she was old enough to enroll in a college dance program at Tuskegee University. Joan admits to being a social activist and participating in the Civil Rights Movement. Although she was aware of artists using music as a form of protest, Joan did not know that dance was also being used as a means to speak about social injustices.

Dance gave Joan a new sense of identity. While studying with Laura Knox, in her hometown, just outside Birmingham, Joan learned a variety of modern dance techniques including Graham, Cunningham, and Limon. Laura gave Joan the focus in dance she needed and made her feel that she really belonged. Together, they attended the International Association of Blacks in Dance (IABD) at Indiana University. This opportunity sparked Joan's interest to pursue a masters degree in physical education at Indiana University with a concentration in dance. Every summer for many years, Joan would make the trip to East St. Louis to study with Katherine Dunham.

The many positive experiences and role models Joan had continued to inspire and support her interest in dance. In addition to earning a BA and MA in Physical Education with a dance concentration, Joan pursued a Ph.D. in Dance Anthropology at NYU, her dissertation is entitled "Haitian Ceremonial Dance on the Concert Stage: The Contextual Transference and Transformation of Yanvalou." Joan believes that dance has the power to "put you in a whole different realm, not of defeat, but of possibilities."

Chapter Summary

The category, Dance as Educational Discourse, includes choreography to communicate, create a forum for discussion, and educate. The choreographers discussed above employ the medium of dance as educational discourse. For many of the participants in this study, dance is the way they best communicate their thoughts. These artists use their bodies to not only express feelings but create a dialogue about these feelings and open up a conversation about issues that may seem a bit sensitive. The role of dance in education may be to empower students and instill life values. It may also be to teach cultural awareness, dance history, composition, or technique. The artists in this section use their choreography to accomplish this.

Noted dance historian Dr. Iantha Tucker takes an historical approach in her teaching. Her mission is to give her students as much knowledge as she can about the influences of African Americans in dance and to honor these legends. Her choreography recreates the story of slavery and emancipation in *Genesis II.* While revealing the hardship of slavery and rigors of plantation living, Iantha focuses on freedom and hope for a better future. Iantha finds that dance can bridge the gap between cultures because it automatically crosses those lines. "In many ways, it already has. Just because it is so pervasive in our society and it goes across cultural lines. Some people don't like to admit it, but it is there."

Dance is not only a way to express feelings and communicate ideas, but it can open up a dialogue for discussing issues. Choreography can create awareness about experiences and issues we all have and stimulate a discourse. The following participants in my study believe that dance is one way to create a forum for discussion.

Peter believes the artist is able to share information and communicate current issues through choreography. As part of the educational component in his work Peter has a "talk back" after the concert, to discuss situations brought to light by his choreography. *Girls Night Out* is one piece that brought out a lot of issues many students had experienced.

Dianne tries to choreograph to the level of her students. Because she has students with varying backgrounds in dance, she tries to reach all levels and challenge each one. Dianne tries to stimulate her students' performance level by having them imagine how the character would feel and visualize the situation.

Joan also believes that dance is a means of communication, but adds that it is possible to create a meaningful interaction with people through dance. She recalled an experience she had when teaching students from multi cultural backgrounds who all spoke different languages. Dance was the vehicle that brought these students together and enabled them to communicate through movement. Joan believes that dance has the power, to "put you in a whole different realm, not of defeat, but of

possibilities." Joan Hamby Burroughs believes it is important to retain history through dance because there is so much history that has been lost.

CHAPTER 6

DANCE AS PRESCRIPTION

"Art is not a mirror to society, but a hammer to shape it." (Unknown)

Dance as Prescription examines dance as a way to create awareness of social issues, and in some cases create change. The medium of dance has been used to expose racism, inequality and social injustice. Choreography can be effective in fostering the reflective discourse necessary to create change.

The artists in this study, as well as many noted African-American artists, believe that dance is an effective medium for raising awareness of social issues, and believe that it is their responsibility to do so. The following artists in this study believe dance is an effective way to create social awareness: Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, Charles Carter, Gary Abbott, and Germaul Barnes.

Jawole Willa Jo Zollar

Background

Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, founder of Urban Bush Women (UBW) is a soft spoken, articulate woman. Successful in the modern dance world, she remains grounded and humble about her accomplishments. In addition to choreographing

twenty-five pieces for UBW, Jawole has created works for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Philadanco, Dayton Contemporary Dance Company, Ballet Arizona, the University of Maryland and the University of Florida. I first learned of Jawole Willa Jo Zollar and the Urban Bush Women in April 2002, when she was a master teacher at the 21st Annual Black College Dance Exchange. Wanting to know more about Jawole and UBW, what she choreographed about and why, I began to research her work. Jawole was a highly regarded choreographer and the subject of the research of many scholars including Chatterjea (1997), DeFrantz (2002), Dixon Gottschild (2003), Goler (1995), Manning (2004), and Perpener (2001).

In April 2004, I was delighted to learn that Urban Bush Women were performing at the Dance Center of Columbia College in Chicago. Jawole had been awarded an honorary doctorate from the Dance Center two years earlier. I attended the family matinee performance, and stayed for a post-performance talk, which followed *Hair Stories* (2001). Being completely engaged with this experience, I returned for the evening performance which premiered *Walking With Pearl – Africa Diaries* (2004); *Girlfriends* (1986); and *Batty Moves* (1995).

I introduced myself to Jawole at a post-concert reception held that evening and asked if she would participate in my study. I was excited about her work and eager to speak more at length with her. We agreed to meet at her apartment in downtown Chicago on May 13, 2004. It was a warm rainy day as we sat

comfortably on the couch in her living room, talking. At times, the sounds of the city sirens and honking overpowered her soft voice. As I reflect on this moment, I remain in awe of this gracious and kind woman who was willing to speak with me. I will always be humbled by this experience.

Cultural Identification

Jawole Willa Jo Zollar grew up in Kansas City, Missouri. She began studying dance at the age of seven with Joseph Stevenson, who trained with Katherine Dunham, and continued with him until she was sixteen. Because Jawole developed a strong cultural identification at a young age, she was comfortable with herself and her body. This enabled Jawole to develop and express her own personal dance style.

> That's where I started dancing. And that's where I got the identification, I guess in dance...the cultural identification in dance, starting with dancing within my community. So, I feel that's where I got grounded in my dance.

Jawole explained that this was not ballet or modern, but rather dancing for feeling. With Stevenson she learned traditional jazz (the real thing). "It was not ballet or modern, so that was good, because what it emphasized was dancing for feeling, and rhythm and style. And I didn't think anything about my body, about being the right body." In African culture, the last thing the dancer thinks about

is body type. "If you were a big fat woman, you did the big fat woman dance" (Zollar, in Dixon Gottschild, 2003, p. 93).

A New Challenge

It was at the University of Missouri, where she earned a B.A, that Jawole first studied modern dance and ballet. Rather than being intimidated by this different style of dance, Jawole looked at it as a new and exciting challenge.

> It was great. You know, it was all new for me. And, so I had never really pointed my feet or any of that kind of thing. So, it was all new for me. It was great, but it was a challenge, because it was trying to find the balance between that impulse that I had as a dancer, and this other kind of movement, and now trying to focus on ballet.
> I really wanted to explore further dance and choreography...because I started training in ballet and modern late, I wanted to get more background and information and more training.

Jawole continued her dance studies at Florida State University, where she completed an M.F.A., and then became a faculty member in the Dance Department. She received the Martin Luther King Distinguished Service Award and holds the Nancy Smith Fichter Professorship from Florida State University. Jawole enjoys the creative side of teaching dance. "I've been teaching all my life....I teach dance technique classes as well as composition. I really don't like to call it composition. I call it creative process, how to be involved in the creative process."

Jawole moved to New York in 1980 to study with Dianne McIntyre at Sounds in Motion, after seeing the company perform at Florida State University.

Dianne was a great role model for Jawole and an influence in the choreography she was to create.

> I moved and had a scholarship to her studio and I worked there for three years. I produced work through her studio and for studio projects. So I was able to really just...and that's where I saw *Smoke and Clouds*...I think it was part of her –15th anniversary... She was great. She's got a mind that moves so fast. And she just really had a respect for dancers and musicians. I think Dianne was a really big influence on my work.

Breaking Ground

Jawole formed the modern company, Urban Bush Women in 1984, "to explore culture as a catalyst for social change, creative expression, and spiritual renewal." (Dixon Gottschild, 2003). She believes that dance can provide awareness in individuals and has the possibility to create change in society. UBW grew from Jawole's desire to form a company of dancers who would work together to create dance works.

> I had been thinking about it for quite awhile, of a way to have an ensemble of people who would work together and create works out of a belief of something. Which is different than rather a pick up kind of company. I really wanted a group of people who would come together and work out of an ensemble process. So....I wanted to formalize that relationship I had with the dancers that I would be working with.

"To be an Urban Bush Woman is to have a set of values. It has to do with being bold, willing to take artistic risks and being concerned about social justice issues." (Mauro, 2004, Sect. 7, p.10).

> I think everybody comes into it for different reasons. I think working with Urban Bush Women there are certain goals that we are putting together for ourselves. But, the dancers all each have their own life paths and their own goals.

It is important to Jawole to make connections and establish a relationship with the dancers because they are so much a part of the creative process.

> The dancers are real collaborators with me, and so who I'm working with influences how the work looks. Who I'm working with and what they bring. It's hard for me to work on other companies. It's really hard for me, because I work with such a collaborative process, with the dancers and the energy...

Strong Values

Jawole explained that value is one marker present in African-American choreography. African Americans have suffered a history of injustices, but have managed to survive in spite of insurmountable odds. The values of hope, strength, virtue, and joy are all values embraced and displayed in the choreography created by African-American artists.

> Well, I think what you see in African American culture, there's certain values...hope is a value, and I think it comes from the experience of being enslaved. Hope is a value so that's often in the dances of African Americans. You know, Ailey's "Revelations" is about hope, it's about reaching, it's about joy. Those are values...and I think strength is also a value, the virtuosity in holding the leg up...it's a value.

Communication

Some choreographers use dance to tell a story, make a statement, or simply create a beautiful work of art. Although Jawole may do all of the above, she describes dance as the way she best communicates to the world. For Jawole, it is her language.

> It's my way of speaking, it's my language. It is the best way that I communicate my thoughts. I think it can reach people in ways that words can't. I think dance communicates from the heart. I have pieces that I love, like *Girlfriends,* the one we did...I love that piece. It's not about dancing and throwing your legs around...it's about communication and being together. And that's a really favorite piece of mine. On the concert work I don't try to think of myself as trying to communicate message. I think I'm trying to communicate ideas that I'm exploring.

Many choreographers use personal experiences to create their works. For some, it may be a way to express events while others use their art as a purging of emotions. In *Girlfriends,* Jawole draws from her personal experiences to communicate feelings. The role of dance is different for each person. For some, it may be a way to communicate to the world.

> *Girlfriends* is about me and my college roommates. I use my life...I use the things in my life to make my work. It's about gestures and telling a story. So I think my work communicates some human emotion for me.

Storytelling and Autobiography

Jawole employs the African tradition of storytelling in *Hair Stories* (2001) to describe the conflict between beauty and self-esteem that African-American women experience with their hair. American women are bombarded daily by the media with pictures proclaiming what the ideal female should look like. This becomes a source of confusion and questioning as women everywhere deal with issues of self-esteem. *Hair Stories* is one way Jawole speaks out to the public about this concern. Jawole poses the question to the audience, how does it feel and what does it mean to have different types of hair (curly, straight, nappy, fine, red, black, brown, etc.)?

Autobiography is the story of one's life, written from the perspective of the person telling the story. It is a translation of how that person interprets one's experience in the world. The use of autobiography in dance has been used to reaffirm self and become empowered. Jawole uses personal experiences to affirm the strength and beauty of Black women. According Goler (1995), she creates her dances from the lens of a critical feminist.

Jawole relates a personal experience taking dance class during an interview in the documentary film, *Free to Dance*. She recalled an instructor's comment to a student, "I don't know what's bigger, your butt or your hair" (Lacy, 2000). Internalizing this comment, Jawole later choreographed *Batty Moves* (1995). "Batty" is a Caribbean word that means buttocks. Jawole celebrates the African-American female body, one section performed entirely with the dancers' backs to

the audience. Challenging the traditional ballet body type she uses dance to speak about the African-American female body. (Goler, 1995).

Batty Moves is a delightful display of rhythms and movement that leaves the audience standing on its feet wanting to join the dancers in their delight. The dancers are "...all shapes, sizes and temperaments, and united by a bravura athleticism fused with searing dramatic presence. Their powerful faces alone suggest the energy and emotion running through their muscular bodies" (Weiss, 2004, p. S21).

> There are certainly social issues surrounding *Batty Moves*...and autobiographical Sometimes the social issues are more in the community-based performance work. But they're sometimes in the concert work.

Social Awareness

Jawole believes that dance has the power to raise awareness of social issues and that the content and message in her dances is a valuable vehicle for expressing these issues. She wants her works to convey meaning to the audience through movement.

> I'd like them to walk away from the theater thinking about something that I've presented differently than when they walked in. So whether that is a change or a deepening... in the way that when you read a book...when you finish reading that book, you have some kind of incite or awareness.

Jawole addresses spiritual, political, and cultural issues, and explores personal experiences of Black women in her choreography. Her choreography is a social commentary about issues that pervade our society. In *Life Dances I-III,* Jawole brings issues of morality, incest and abuse to the stage. *Womb Wars* (1992) is a comment on abortion. In *Lipstick,* she looks at the exploitation of female adolescents. Jawole's works are subject to multiple interpretations based upon her audience (Chatterjea, 2003). Perpener (2001) describes her choreographic style as an eclectic improvisational approach which is used to speak to the audience about the African- American experience

Jawole uses dance as a voice to express issues that plague our society. *Shelter* (1988) was created as a comment about the plight of people left homeless. The tragic events of September 11, 2001, brought new meaning to the work, when several members of her dance company were left stranded with only the clothes on their backs. The message is intended to remind us of how close we all are to being homeless, just a paycheck away.

> I had two members that were working with me at the time, who lived right down by the World Trade Center, who were out of their homes for two months...and had just what they had on their backs. So, we don't know what the circumstances in life might bring. So, life's a journey.

In a time of public outcries of discontent with our current government, Jawole expresses her concern for society and urges Americans to vote. In her latest

works, *Are We a Democracy* and *Sojourn of Truth*, she reminds citizens that voting is not only a privilege and right, but also a necessity.

> Sometimes the social issues are more in the community-based performance work. On the community work, it's a little bit different... In the community dance pieces, which are different, they're really focused around an issue that a community is facing. Right now, I'm working on a series of works called, *Are We a Democracy?* It's about the election process encouraging people to register to vote. And that it's a right that we have and a privilege and that we should exercise it. What I'm working on now with the students, the focus is on Susan B. Anthony. In the summer, the focus will be on *Sojourn of Truth* and the Civil Rights era. You know, making it possible to vote.

Revisiting History

Jawole is not the first African-American choreographer to explore movement as a possibility to create social change. Pearl Primus (1919-1994), one of the early African- American pioneers in modern dance, created African-based dances with themes of slavery, spirituals, jazz and blues, social unrest, and the quest for democracy. Inspired by the seminal work of Primus, Jawole created *Walking With Pearl (2004).* She narrates from the journals Primus kept about her visits to Africa, in the 1940s and 50s, while the dancers reenact the roles of mother, daughter, and student. The backdrop displays images of the Black diaspora, of suffering and of survival. According to Jawole,

> I think dance...that a history of the people at any given time, is contained in the dances that they do. So, the dances of the twenties, tells us something about the culture at that time. The dances of the thirties, tells us something about the culture at that time. So, I think the dances are a physical history of

> a people. There's a lot of literature missing and I think that's everybody's job to ensure that history is out there.

Looking at the world through Jawole's eyes, we can learn about stories from the past as she brings history to life in her choreography. Chicago Tribune dance critic Lucio Mauro had this to say about Urban Bush Women,

> When Zollar established her company 20 years ago with an emphasis on community outreach, she unconsciously paralleled the goals of Pearl Primus, a Black pioneer and activist who based much of her choreography, beginning in the 1940's, on racial issues (Mauro, 2004, Sect. 7, p. 10).

Rewriting History

Epic narrative tells a story, but rather than focusing on one life, it encompasses a group or culture of people. Dance as epic narrative, or the New Epic Dance is used to celebrate "the legacy of a people who survived conquest...in the spirit of those who refused to be defeated" (Albright, 1997, p. 151).

One of the main themes in Jawole's *Bones and Ash: A Gilda Story*, is acquiring new knowledge through a rebirth. "Girl" is a runaway slave who is taken in as a surrogate daughter by "Gilda" and "Bird." They teach her to understand her past in order to reclaim it and envision the future. "Gilda" a vampire, wishes to give "Girl" the gift of long life, through the exchange of blood. This act is choreographed with movement to show the energy and the spiritual connection of the characters. The story comes to an end as "Gilda" begins her journey back to

earth to her homeland of Africa. In Bones and Ash, Zollar reveals the strong connections between women and the significance of going back to reclaim the past (Albright, 1997).

For African Americans, the retelling of a story is meaningful as a way to "re-right" history by rewriting it from the perspective of that culture. Combining the knowledge of the past with one's experience of the present can provide hope for the future. History is refigured as a living continuum based on a sense of self and cultural identity, rather than as a list of chronological facts (Albright, 1997).

Crossing Cultures

Dance brings people together. Whether to socialize, be entertained or to explore new styles of dance through an educational or recreational setting, dance can create a sense of community, bridging the gap between cultures. Because movement is the means of expression in dance, people from all cultures and ethnicities can partake in the dance experience.

> When you're teaching a class and a person doesn't speak the language, then you've got this movement...and you can't explain certain subtleties...you've just got to be in it together. And I think that's great, when you're dancing with someone socially, who doesn't speak your language. It's about the dancing, not about the language.

Contemporary dance has been very much influenced by all cultures and

styles of dance. The infusion and combination of many different cultural voices is creating a new and exciting future for modern dance.

> There are so many different choreographic voices that are out there, that have a particular historical moment....American dance is going to be a really interesting thing. American contemporary dance....because it's going to be infused with the voices of many, many people. Whereas, I think what people mostly knew about is the White artist. And I think in the next twenty years it's going to be such an open field, not only Black, White, Latino, Asian...lots of work coming out of young Vietnamese and Cambodian artists. Contemporary dance is very interesting.

Filling Her Palette

Music, rhythms, literature, people, life experiences, all contribute to a rich and exciting piece of artwork. Jawole likes to fill her life with as much as she can so that she can draw from these experiences. She uses everything about life to create from. For that reason, it is important for Jawole to "fill her palette" so she has a wide range of experiences to pull from for her choreography.

> I use everything. That's something I was talking to my students about the other day...I try to look at every...I think about putting in good experiences, so I have to draw from. So, the kind of work I see, the kind of books I read...the travel...those things...the people I meet... Those are all things to draw from, the background and experiences. All of that is what I think is an artist's palette. And so I want to have a very strong palette.
>
> I love music and rhythms and I like working with percussion, so there's always a nice close connection with that...The music is often key to that, but not always.
>
> As she continued, she pointed to the television in the corner of the room.

> It's the tools. Understanding that if you use your life's experiences, if you use your environment when you choreograph...and if I'm stuck, I look at the shape of that cabinet (Jawole indicated the console displaying her television set) and I think, well that's an interesting shape and what might that mean in movement. You just use everything around you.

Jawole admits that her choreography has changed throughout the years. The creative process, for Jawole, requires research. The process for each piece may be different and creates its own challenges. She may start with an idea or be inspired by music.

> I don't really like to call it composition. I call it creative process, how to be involved in the creative process. It's a collaboration with the dancers. It involves research...having researched the areas or things that I'm interested in...having developed choreographed phrases...and then getting in the studio and working with all of those elements together.
> In the beginning, I was really interested in a more noble approach to movement...and I wanted to strip away the contemporary dance reference. And I think in past years, I've been really interested more in finding the connections of my contemporary work with kind of like the raw feeling place.

The Dance Experience

Jawole believes that dance can serve many purposes. Although the dance experience can provide meaning and satisfaction for individuals, the experience may not be the same for everyone. Some people may dance just to enjoy the pleasure of moving while others may commit to using dance as a vehicle of expression for their feelings.

> For some people, it's education, for some it's entertainment, for some people it's a very deep artistic experience. And I think dance runs the gamut of any of those experiences. And I like to see sometimes, just kicking the legs up and twirling... and at other times, I like to see work that is esoteric and challenging... and then there are times, you know, when I like works that are just beautiful.

Jawole has learned something different about herself with each new piece she choreographs. Through each dance, she can reflect on her work and gain a better understanding of self.

> I think with each piece, I've learned something about myself and about the creative process, and about choreographing and making works. So that each one, to me, has kind of a unique gift to offer, in terms of what I'm able to learn and discern about it, so... I each piece I have a different challenge. It's hard for me to work on other companies. It's really hard for me because I work with such a collaborative process with the dancers and the energy. The dancers are real collaborators with me and so who I'm working with influences how the work looks.

Jawole compares the process of creating dance much like the process of creating life. She finds this to be challenging and at the same time rewarding.

> It's very complex. Choreographing is very challenging because it's giving birth to something. So there's a gestation period. And there is the um...period when you're in rehearsal and you're trying to make it make sense. Sometimes it doesn't and sometimes it's not happening and sometimes there's a flash or a moment, a defining moment where the piece finds itself, and sometimes it never does.

Jawole finds choreographing to be a challenge because she states that you are always in negotiation with yourself. Art is not something that happens

spontaneously. The artist may spend hours, months, even years formulating an idea or thought which may or may not eventually emerge as art.

> You're always in negotiation with yourself about doing the thing that you love, yet it challenges you. I think one of the things I try to tell people is that the muse is a very unruly person. So, it comes when it comes and makes you change courses and become interested in the...but it's the discipline of the work that keeps the focus. The muse may not visit, but you still have to be disciplined about doing the work.

Why Dance

Ask any dancer why they dance and they will probably reply that they cannot imagine doing anything else. Jawole loves movement and motion. For Jawole, dance is her life, it is what she loves to do.

> I think it's so much a part of my life...it's been a part of my life for a very long time. Certainly, it's my profession. It's what I do for a living. And I do it because I love to dance. I love moving. I don't think there's just one feeling when I'm dancing. It's a complex set of feelings. It's just enjoying motion. Enjoying a move...enjoying motion. I like...I like movement. In fact, a friend was laughing at me because I don't use my command keys. I use my mouse.
>
> And he was like, 'Oh, you just like the way it moves. Oh, of course, you're a dancer. You like the way it moves.' So I love movement.

Her Legacy

Jawole is an articulate, yet soft spoken woman. Although she possesses a gentle demeanor, her choreography is a force to be reckoned with. Jawole's

choreography is thought-provoking, honest and timely. Her legacy is to use her voice to express the stories that are not often told.

> Finding a voice for stories that are often not told. The under told stories that are written. When a lion tells a story, it would be very different from that of the captor. Many African American stories are told from the point of view of white people and I think I tell the stories from a different point of view. And that's what I have to offer.

Summary

Jawole began dancing at an early age with Joseph Stevenson, a student of Katherine Dunham. With Stevenson she received the strong cultural identification that gave her the confidence necessary to succeed in a dance world where physicality often supercedes the internal essence of dance. After studying "dance for feeling," Jawole went on to pursue a BA in dance at the University of Missouri. She rose to the challenge to learn the dance techniques of modern dance and ballet, earning an MFA at Florida State University and taught as a faculty member, where she received distinguished honors for her work.

After moving to New York, Jawole founded the modern company Urban Bush Women in 1984, "to explore culture as a catalyst for social change, creative expression, and spiritual renewal" (Jawole, in Dixon Gottschild, 2003). She formed UBW from a desire to have a company of dancers who worked together with a common goal to create dances. Jawole finds the dancers to be an important part of

the creative process. "The dancers are real collaborators with me, and so who I'm working with influences how the work looks."

Jawole believes that through movement, dance has the power to raise awareness of social issues. The content and message in her dances is a valuable vehicle for expressing these issues. Jawole wants her works to convey meaning to the audience and create awareness or give them a new perspective. Many choreographers use personal experiences to create their dances. Jawole draws from both positive and negative memories for her choreography. *Girlfriends* is about human emotion and personal connections. *Hair Stories* and *Batty Moves* celebrate the African-American female body. Internalized memories of the insensitive comments by a dance instructor may have triggered Jawole's desire to create these pieces.

Many of her works are a social commentary about issues that pervade our society. In *Life Dances I-III,* Jawole brings issues of morality, incest and abuse to the stage. *Womb Wars* (1992) is a comment on abortion. In *Lipstick*, she looks at the exploitation of female adolescents. Jawole takes a political stance in *Shelter*, describing the plight of homeless people, and the concern for maintaining a democracy in her latest works, *Are We a Democracy* and *Sojourn of Truth.*

Jawole believes that it is the artist's responsibility to ensure history, which she demonstrates in *Walking With Pearl,* based on the journals of Pearl Primus. Looking at the world through Jawole's eyes, we can learn about stories from the

past as she brings history to life in her choreography. The retelling of a story is meaningful for African Americans as a way to "re-right" history by rewriting it from the perspective of that culture. One of the main themes in Jawole's *Bones and Ash: A Gilda Story*, is acquiring new knowledge through a rebirth. "Girl" is a runaway slave who is taken in as a surrogate daughter by "Gilda" and "Bird." They teach her to understand her past in order to reclaim it and envision the future.

Jawole believes that dance can serve many purposes. It may be educational, artistic, or entertaining, but it has the power to bring people together just to enjoy the movement. Dance plays an important role in Jawole's life; it is her language and the best way she communicates her thoughts to the world. She believes dance can reach people in ways that words cannot because dance communicates from the heart.

Jawole is inspired by music, rhythms, people and life and believes in keeping a "full palette" to create powerful works. With each piece she choreographs, Jawole learns something new about herself, each dance offering its own set of challenges. She compares creating a dance to the process of creating life. For Jawole, dance is life and she loves being a part of it.

Charles L. Carter

Background

Dr. Charles L. Carter, is the Director of the Bal-Chi Dance Company which he founded in 1998. Dr. Carter, Associate Professor in the Department of Kinesiology and Physical Education at Northern Illinois University (NIU), teaches African-American dance, dance education, and modern/jazz dance techniques. Although Charles began dancing in high school, he became more involved while attending Frostberg State College and went on to study dance at West Virginia University on a fellowship, where he earned his Doctoral Degree.

I first met with Charles on January 27, 2004 after observing a dance class where he was teaching the Cakewalk. I wanted to discuss my interest in my research study, "How does dance and the choreographic experience provide meaning for African- American-artist?" As he reflected on his personal experiences, he agreed that the project was interesting and encouraged me to proceed with my study. I spent the next two years researching this topic and conducting interviews.

Change Through Dance

On March 7, 2006, I met with Charles, the last participant of the study, in his office in Anderson Hall on the campus of Northern Illinois University in DeKalb.

Charles had just finished teaching a dance class and was telling me about the exciting weekend of dance they had just had at NIU. Debbie Allen was a guest lecturer and had taught a master dance class. He told me that in her lecture, she spoke of how dance could change society. He related an experience Ms. Allen had when traveling to a foreign country.

> When they went into the room, the dancers were doing a lot of hip-hop. That in itself, showed her that the world is getting smaller and how we're changing things. They're starting to learn our culture and they're learning it through hip-hop. And she's seeing the same thing all over the world. That's socially how she sees change.

Strength in Flexibility

Charles began dancing in high school, where he received basic training in modern dance and Graham Technique. He realized early on that he was more flexible than most of the other fellows because he could do both the split and high kicks. He made the decision to study dance at Frostberg State College, and furthered his studies in dance at West Virginia University on a fellowship. At that point, Charles had the opportunity to dance in a small ballet company, where he was also doing jazz and modern dance.

> I figured I needed technique to be better because I was never a big person. Most of the guys were big, but I could do things like the split and battements and all that stuff, which was different from the other guys. I had danced a

> little bit in high school. But I started really getting into it at that point. I got involved in dance, at a very small college, Frostberg State and then I went on to study at West Virginia University on a fellowship.

Working with the Masters

Charles studied dance with Eva Anderson, director of the longest running African-American dance company in Baltimore. He attributes her as being one of the best choreographers and storytellers in the world through dance. He also took classes in New York with James Truitte, Katherine Dunham, and Talley Beatty. Charles commented on the difficulty of Beatty's choreography and an appreciation for his work.

> I've taken classes with Katherine Dunham. You can see I have my Dunham technique shirt on. Talley Beatty, I don't know if you've ever seen his work, *The Stack Up.* Well, when I took his work shop, he gave a combination that was super hard. His assistant had to do it over and over again because nobody could get it. Then we were ok with it after awhile. But later, I saw the dance, *The Stack Up* and I realized the combination was from *The Stack Up.*

Empowering Through Dance

Charles believes that dance can create change by empowering people. He believes that through hard work and discipline, people can achieve their goals, regardless of their background. Charles was proud to talk about his involvement in the community. He tries to instill in the individuals he works with the idea that if one works hard, one can have the best. For Charles, the role of dance can be many

things. One thing dance can do is bring people together from different cultures and establish a form of community without regard to racial or cultural differences.

> I think it does, but I don't think people are necessarily aware of it. And I think it can, if people become aware of it. I do what we call a community dance program. I go into various cities...What I would basically do is bring different groups and cultures together and we would just dance. My purpose in doing that is to empower those people through dance. I wanted them to understand that they could work together and they could create dance or any type of art, but they could have the best. We had a professional rehearsal stage, because I wanted the best for these people who often got hand-me-downs, so to speak... I wanted to show them that if you wanted to do this, you can have the best, but you have to work towards it... They needed to learn that they could do whatever they wanted if they worked together...in some kind of way, you're going to touch the life of somebody outside of your race, ethnicity, culture or whatever...So, that's how I think we can bring community together.

Creating Awareness

Charles uses dance as a teaching tool, not only to empower people but to educate them. The majority of the work Charles does is based on what he feels is of relevance to the community. Reaching out to the community by presenting socially relevant topics is important to Charles. His choreography reflects his concern for problems society is facing. The audience plays a large role in Charles's choreography and because he knows who the audience will be, he tailors his choreography to suite their interests or needs. It is important to him that the audience understands his work. Charles wants to convey a message and whether he

is trying to shock or educate the audience, his choreography does have a purpose. The AIDS's Project is just one example of his work that explores social issues.

> I do what we call a community dance program. Did you notice I have a poster of the AIDS Project? I try to pick topics that are relevant to the community and the world. For example, in the early 90's...the 80's really...the big topic was "Black on Black Crime." I did a piece, it was a full length concert, "And Then There Were None." I started doing full length works, when...AIDS just...I guess because being gay, I know a lot of people who have had AIDS. It's just been part of the gay culture. That's how I got involved in it.

Charles uses choreography to confront his audience with issues and problems with which society is faced. He not only creates awareness of these problems, but also relates a message to the audience that they are responsible for correcting these issues.

> The audience is coming to see me so they need to know where I'm coming from. If we're doing the AIDS Project, the audience is going to say, well, who am I? Why am I so special that I am doing this? Basically, I like for them to relate as to what's happening in society and also understanding that we have to get it together. My audiences are basically Black African Americans. Usually a lot of the problems we deal with concern Black people. Black on Black crime, AIDS, the down low, women getting AIDS, Black women getting AIDS, and that type of thing. I want them to be aware of the problems, but I also want them to be aware that they have to do something about it. We can no longer wait for other people to take care of their problems....And that doesn't necessarily mean someone from another African group, it just means your next door neighbor. We have to get it together...That's basically what I try to do with the company.

In addition to confronting social problems, Charles believes dance can help to heal these problems. Dance offers therapeutic benefits through the release of emotions.

> So what can dance do for us? I see it as a teaching tool. I see it as entertainment. And I see it as a healing art....with things like 911 and all those types of things, we have to use dance.

Bal Chi

Charles founded the Bal Chi Dance Company in DeKalb, Illinois, in 1998 because of a need for the African-American dance students at NIU to have their own performing venue. Charles found that although the African-American students wanted to dance, they didn't really fit in with the current dance program, which was primarily ballet-based.

> I was teaching at Northern Illinois University and a group of minorities didn't get to perform on the main stage, here. Because they didn't know the ballet or they weren't interested in learning ballet and that type of thing...They didn't want to do what the department wanted and the department didn't really want them, also... The kids started graduating and they were like, Dr. Carter, we'd like to perform on that stage once....So we just pooled our resources and talent together, and we just did that one performance and it just lead to performance after performance. And it became a company... and Bal Chi was since '98.

Dancers as Process

Charles believes that his choreography has changed through the years in his own understanding of the process of choreographing. He usually begins with a theme first and then looks for the music, but doesn't really think about it because the choreographic process is so natural to him. Charles enjoys choreographing most when he is in a space that he is familiar with and is working with dancers he knows. He spoke proudly of the dancers in his company, which led me to ask if the dancers influence his choreography. Charles agreed that they have a definite role and are part of the choreographic process.

> Like with my company, they can usually do the moves before I give them the moves, and I sort of like that. They don't like to be but they are. I draw from their experiences but you have to understand that I've had these people for over a fifteen-year period.
>
> I think it's (my choreography) changed a lot (over the years). My work has developed from getting into form, where as in the beginning it wasn't about form. It was just about, ok, the music is on, let's move. And now I look for patterns and all those types of things.
>
> I have a theme. Sometimes, I'll have the music. Sometimes, I will have the thought first. I usually have the theme first and then I'll move toward the music and work with that.
>
> I'm getting ready to do a piece on, that Blacks can't speak English and it's called *Brown's Blues.* It's about Brown vs. Board of Education. I think it's about what Black people expected from Brown vs. Board of Education. This is an example of...I don't have any music, but I have a thought. I have the idea...

Although most of his choreography focuses on social issues, Dr. Carter admits that he would like to set a more traditional, classical piece on his dancers.

> However, I'm trying to get away from that. I want to do a pretty piece. I want to a piece that uses classical music and pretty flowing dresses and just dance for the sake of dancing, just to make the girls look pretty... Because I think we do so many social topics, they're hard. You know, they're pretty because they're beautiful women, but it's not like a relaxing piece just dancing and letting the audience enjoy the dance.

Mirroring Life

Charles views dance as a teaching tool, entertainment, and as a healing art. He agrees that dance serves as a form of self-expression for him. When he looks at his own choreography, he sees his life. Growing up in the 1950s, Charles realized the need for a strong work ethic and is trying to help others succeed through his community based work.

> It's a reflection of my life....When I look back I can see how my life was influenced by the Civil Rights Movement. I'm a kid of the 50's. And I can see how my life was influenced by the years when we, as African Americans had to work twice as hard because we needed to get ahead. So I'm thinking that's why I do community projects and things. I think I'm just a giving person, because of whatever I've gone through in my life.

A former elementary school teacher, Charles remains inspired by children and uses choreography to express issues that concern children.

> I was an elementary school teacher and I think that's one of the reasons my work is so much community-based. Because it's also teaching....So

> children have influenced my choreography. I think one of the things, that influences my choreography now, or influences my work is children, little children.
>
> That goes back to my life in that being a kid of the 50's, when African Americans were basically teachers or preachers, a lot of my family were teachers and of course, I was going to be a teacher and I'm still teaching. That's why I like doing it.

Integrating the Arts

Charles enjoys teaching and working with students, adding that he always knew he would go into the teaching profession. He mentioned a number of positive ways dance can inspire young people while teaching values and life skills.

> I'm getting ready to do a work, *The Wiz,* but it's going to be all dance...And I'm working with my dancers... We're bringing some underprivileged kids on campus and they're going to learn how to dance, *The Wiz* but we're also teaching them etiquette, trying to improve academic skills, and bring the arts together. We're trying to show them that this is definitely a multicultural society and so we have to work together.

Charles believes one reason new teachers have so many problems in the schools today is that they do not receive adequate preparation for the reality of teaching in the public schools. He believes integrating dance within the academic curriculum can help in the process.

> I want to do a book on dance history geared towards teachers who are going to teach in public schools. I think number one, young people, teachers who choose to teach, they usually have the idea that they're going to train dancers. But when you have thirty-five people that really don't want to dance, they can forget all that. Everybody with the black tights and the

> white shirts, the black tights and all that stuff, or black leotards, everybody tendu-ing at the same time, you can forget that. People need to understand that when you go into the public schools, you need to integrate the academics with the art. I think one reason why we don't have more dance, in public schools is we want to see a public school education. We want to see some grades, we want to see high grades.

Charles believes that dance can instill values, discipline, and teach etiquette, while improving academic skills. Although dance can make the learning process fun, Charles maintains the importance of discipline in the classroom and setting ground rules.

> I think it can make learning fun, but I think that the teacher needs to understand how a creative dance class and a performing arts center is. I'm into creative dance, too, but I believe that you have to have some discipline. When I teach kindergarteners, I need them to walk into that room, take off those shoes, put both shoes together. Then when they put their shoes down, they sit and they have to wait quietly. And we learn all of that and it might take four weeks or whatever. But once they learn that, then we move across the floor, we dance. But I think that young teachers or new teachers, they don't know all that and no one has really showed them how to do it. So I want to do a book, how to teach. But I want it to be African-American dance.

Although much has been written about the discipline of dance, there is an egregious discrepancy in the reporting between the contributions of African-American and European-American dancers. Charles spoke of the need to have an updated dance history book written from an African-American perspective.

> I want to either do a dance history book, straight...or dance history from an African-American perspective. I've taught dance history for so many years and I always see this much (he indicates a lot) of European history and this

> much (he indicates a little) of African American, and there's so much, you know. That book is so old it's time to get something new, but also I want to write it a certain way. I want to either do, like I said earlier, a book for dance history class on the college level.

Look for the Likenesses

Dance is a living history of the people at any given time in a society. Telling stories through dance is one way to learn about those who came before us. The oral tradition of story telling was the way people passed on traditions and customs in African culture. Through dance, we can learn about the past and how the dances created were a combination of many influences.

Looking back into the development of his own career in dance, Charles reflected on his experience studying with one of his favorite dance teachers, Eva Anderson, whom he described as "the best storyteller in the world though dance."

> I think she's the best story-teller in the world through dance. She would do a lot of African tales. She did Briar rabbit and some gospel, but it wasn't the traditional gospel dance. It really had meaning. One was *Winter without Days.* There were a lot of slave dances within it, done to traditional spirituals. *Rock My Soul* was in it.

It was apparent just how influential Eva Anderson was to Charles, when I observed a class he was teaching to the students at NIU on the Cakewalk. Charles pointed out the similarities between African-American and European dance within the Cakewalk.

> She would do things like the Cakewalk. Most people will look at the Cakewalk and see an African-American dance, which is true. But I think that people don't understand that it is both an African American as well as a European dance. I think we tend to show differences in races or ethnicities, rather than how we are alike. Take the Cakewalk…the Cakewalk is based on the debutante ball…. Now the slaves are looking in the windows and seeing this debutante ball, but they're taking that and making that their own.
>
> What I found interesting, when we look at European dance and African dance…and I'm sure it happens in different situations. When we look at European dance and African dance…but just within the Cakewalk, we see the circle, the African circle and the European line, in the minuet and that type of dance coming together. So that's what I mean when I say how alike we are and how we've actually worked together and we didn't even know it. But if you think about it, that's what really happened. But we often separate everything and we don't look for likenesses.

The Dance Experience

The dance experience is the lived experience. It exists only in the moment and can trigger feelings and emotions that compare to nothing else. Charles describes dance as an emotional and physical experience, one that makes him happy and feel connected. Of particular interest was his comment about experiencing a connection to some kind of energy. Charles is not the first to speak about a force that drives him to do what he loves. Some call it the creative force, while others refer to this feeling as a spiritual force.

> How does dance make me feel? It makes me feel connected. Connected with what I don't know. I guess, connected with some form of energy. But I'm not aware of that particular energy. But it also gives me that sense of

> camaraderie and because I have that camaraderie, I'm happy. I feel joy. I like the physicality of it. I like the sweat. It just makes me feel good.

The body is the instrument of expression in dance. Whereas the painter uses a paint brush, or the musician plays the bow of a violin, the dancer's body and instrument are one and the same.

> Well, just from my experience, I have always worked with a company rather than as a solo performer. So, I think you develop a strong sense of camaraderie within the company. I also think we're different in the sense that we live the art, you know, most people don't take around their uniforms all day long. Or most people don't go to the mailbox and when they get there do a grand battement attitude just to put the letter in, cause you know you have to maintain your technique. Or if you see a fire hydrant, you'll go to do a rond de jambe over the fire hydrant.

Dancers develop strong relationships with other dancers because they spend so many hours in class or in rehearsal together. They have to learn how to use their bodies to communicate and express feelings and ideas, while trusting their partners. Dancers learn to listen and develop discipline by working hard at their craft.

> I think we're unique in that we know our body and just the way we communicate... plus, we're touchy people. We touch each other so much, you know.... And I think we get this sense of another person. When I danced, I enjoyed performing and I enjoyed bringing whatever I had, talent or whatever, to the audience. One thing I really enjoyed was having a dancer in back of me and not seeing that dancer, but I could feel the energy and move with that person. So, I don't think most people have that kind of sense... And then we get in there and we work and we work and we work. And we're told that we have to do that, so we do it... There are people who tell you what to do, and you do it.

Connecting to the Past

Dance conferences are offered across the country to not only ensure that quality dance instruction is taking place in the schools and studios, but also to provide instructors with background and historical information. One festival that deserves mention is Bates Festival, which Charles has attended every year for the past fifteen years. Bates Dance Festival in New England brings together an international community of choreographers, performers, educators, and students to study, perform, and create choreography. The demographics of the students who attend Bates, according to Charles, are primarily European-American dancers, from age twenty to thirty-five and up. Charles recalled taking a site specific class and the assignment to locate and choreograph around a set of steps. What began as a choreographic exercise became a history lesson brought to life.

> It was hot that day and I just didn't feel like doing that work, so I just sat on a pair of steps, 'cause it was cool. I wasn't looking for any steps at all, but I just kept thinking and then I realized I was on a step and actually it was three tiers.

It was such a hot day that Charles did not feel like working, but the coolness of the steps replenished him causing embodied memories to stir, as Charles reflected on the past.

> So I did this African piece. I started here, and I was doing a wave type thing...to show that we were leaving Africa. And I should say African piece because we weren't slaves until we came to America. Once we got here, I

> went to the second tier...I moved around to this side and I showed the indignities of the holocaust. Then when I got here, I was saying "The Pledge of Allegiance." I was in a pose like the Statue of Liberty. Then when I got here, I was a slave again, and I was being auctioned off.
>
> Now why I went African American, African American, African American...and then Jewish over here, I don't know, but that's what came out. So to make this work, I had a friend of mine serve as a tour guide. So I wanted them to get that type of idea, being on the water, leaving home. Then here, I had people caged.

Meaning Through Reflection

As Charles told his story, he realized the impact his choreography had on the other students. Reliving the Middle Passage and Enslavement brought a new awareness not only to the students in his class, but to himself as well.

> Now that I'm speaking to you, when I look at this...there's a parallel. That these people are caged and in some sense are treated like animals, and these people on this side are treated like animals in a cage, so to speak. I'm just realizing that. So I probably wasn't thinking that. But the "Pledge of Allegiance" because we're in America and then when we got here, remember we had the tour guide, talking about all of this. When we got here, he pretended he was an auctioneer and he was selling me as a slave. And the people in the audience, they were saying, like "Twenty dollars, thirty dollars," whatever. I know the price is probably not a true price that you would buy slaves, but...they kept coming up with all these numbers.
>
> You have to understand that all of these people are white. Maybe one was Black, but I think most of them were White. We had like twenty people. When these people realized what was happening, people started crying. It surprised me because I wasn't expecting that at all, especially from these young people. I just never thought of it as being a mirror for some of these people.

Crossing Cultures

Charles points out that through social forms of dance, such as hip-hop, people from other countries are able to learn about American culture. "The world is getting smaller...because they're starting to learn our culture and they're learning it through hip-hop." In addition to crossing cultures, the medium of dance reveals how our own culture draws from the past.

> I think it happens automatically. For example, in African-American dance, if you look back on African dance, you see the circle, people dancing inside the circle. If you look at hip-hop today, people are dancing in the circle. If you go to an African-American party, you will see a circle. People will dance and then you will see that little competition and people will come around it. So, I think it's good to know where that came from.

His Legacy

Charles is the Johnny Appleseed of African-American dance. His goal is to educate society by spreading the power of dance.

> I'm not ever leaving... Just spreading dance. You know, just spreading it. Going back to my high school roots of giving back. So that's what it's going to be, I think. I gave back and I encouraged the people that I gave to, to give back... So that's the legacy, giving back...and educating through dance. I think when it comes to dance education, we don't know as a society, what dance education is... We're using dance as the medium, but what's the outcome?

Summary

Charles prides himself as being an effective teacher using choreography as a teaching tool to inform his students and the community about current issues. Artistic director of Bal Chi Dance Company, Charles created the company in 1998, out of a need for the minority students at NIU to have a place to perform. It is not surprising that many of the themes in his choreography deal with problems that concern African Americans. Charles wants his dancers and the community at large to be aware of these problems and realize they have to do something about them.

His choreography deals with social issues that have impacted African Americans, such as AIDS, Black on Black crime, and the down-low. Another theme that has influenced his choreography is children. A former elementary school teacher, Charles is concerned with the idea that "Blacks can't speak English" and has created a piece called "A Brown's Blues", based on Brown versus the Board of Education.

One of Charles industrious projects is *The Wiz,* but for this production, he is bringing underprivileged kids to campus not only to learn how to dance, but also to learn etiquette. Trying to improve academic skills and bring the arts together is one goal Charles has. In his community dance program, Charles goes to various cities and brings different cultural groups together to dance. His goal is to empower people through dance and make them aware they can achieve their dreams through

hard work and by working together. It is important to Charles to show them we live in a multi-cultural society and have to work together.

"Look for the likenesses," may well be his mantra. A major influence in Charles' career was his favorite teacher Eva Anderson, whom Charles credits as being the best storyteller in the world. What he remembers about her was how she always looked for the likenesses in dance and people. "Too often, we separate everything and we don't look for the likenesses."

Charles believes that dance reflects life. Choreographers have always used life experience as themes for their works. "African American leaders or so-called first-tier, their work reflected life or imitated life. Ailey with the Blues...George Faison. I see it in a lot of dancers and African-American choreographers." Charles maintains that the stories of African Americans are different because the history is different, and African-American choreographers often tell history in the dances they do. Dance for Charles is an integral part of his life, as a dancer, teacher, and community activist. But most of all, dance is what makes Charles feel happy, emotionally, physically, and spiritually. Dance just makes him feel good.

Gary Abbott

Background

Gary Abbott, Associate Artistic Director for Deeply Rooted Dance Theater

in Chicago, was always in love with dancing, but did not begin to study dance until he was nineteen. His first exposure to dance class was with Barbara Sullivan, who taught African dance at the Atlanta Dance Theater. He began studying different styles of dance with various companies and received a scholarship to the California School of the Arts where he studied ballet. Gary has danced with the Rudy Perez Dance Theater, Los Angeles Dance Theater, Lula Washington Dance Theater, and the Sidewalk Dance Company in Knoxville, Tennessee. At the age of twenty-eight, Gary joined the Cleo Parker Robinson Dance Ensemble, where he danced for the next ten years and had the opportunity to work with African-American dance legends Donald McKayle, Talley Beatty, Eleo Pomare, James Truitte, and Katherine Dunham.

Gary has utilized his choreographic talents throughout the United States and Europe as guest choreographer for the Joseph Holmes Chicago Dance Theatre, Cleo Parker Robinson Dance Ensemble and in collaboration with dance artists from the Atlanta area. In 1995, Gary joined forces with Kevin Iega Jeff, founder of Jubilation Dance Company, to co-found Deeply Rooted Dance Theater. "Deeply Rooted Dance Theater embodies the rich traditions of African American dance theater and music...inspiring expressions of contemporary life and igniting emotional responses from diverse audiences" (www.deeplyrooted.com).

I had seen the Deeply Rooted Dance Theater perform in January 2005 and again in November 2005. I can only say that the performers were nothing short of

amazing and that the choreography was compelling and riveting. My enthusiasm for this company lead me to ask Gary Abbott, Associate Artistic Director for the company, to be part of my study. Gary agreed and on December 16, 2005, I interviewed him at the Deeply Rooted Dance Studios in Chicago.

Always a Dancer

Gary says that he was always a dancer but did not know that one could study dance. His mother provided the encouragement, but it was when a friend took Gary to his first dance class that he became hooked.

> I always was a dancer, always in love with dancing. My mom would make me dance for her girlfriends. She'd put on the music and I would do whatever. I didn't start dancing until I was eighteen, no nineteen because I didn't know that you could study dance. I thought you had to be discovered or something. Cause I would always see the dancers in the movies. And a friend of mine took me to my first dance class. I started off in African dance, with the Atlanta Dance Theater, with a woman named Barbara Sullivan, and from that moment on I was hooked.

Gary began studying different styles of dance with various companies to broaden his scope of dance. After auditioning for the California School of the Arts, he received a scholarship in dance and studied ballet. Gary's next move was to Los Angeles, where he auditioned for music videos but was unsuccessful. What he discovered was that although he was a proficient dancer, he did not have the right look.

> I was dancing a lot in LA, you know, the LA scene. And that was in the very beginning of the whole video, the music video, sort of, revolution when it first started music videos. But I didn't make it into the videos, 'cause I wasn't that type of look. Like now, you can see everybody in the video. You can see all examples of African Americans and white folk and Native Americans, and you can see just about everything in a video. But then, they were looking for a specific type. And I was not, I didn't fit into the mold.

Gary's talents prevailed and he soon found himself dancing with the Rudy Perez Dance Theater, Los Angeles Dance Theater and the Lula Washington Dance Theater. With finances slim, he returned home and then joined the Sidewalk Dance Company in Knoxville, Tennessee, where as Gary remarked, "I got grounded." After the Sidewalk Dance Company, Gary went to New York but found himself unable to focus on his craft and decided to go back to the Lula Washington Dance Theater, in Los Angeles. He was about to join the United States Army when he attended an audition that would change his life forever.

> I tried to spend some time in New York, but New York and I didn't get along. I was at a wild phase in my life and I couldn't quite discipline myself. I couldn't focus.... And I decided to join the service.... I think I was about twenty-eight, twenty-nine.... Because you know, they said you could get an education. I was already feeling that dance is like being in the army.
>
> You do what people tell you to do and you use your body. You do discipline and if you do discipline, you can make it through. That next day there was an audition for a company in Denver, called Cleo Parker Robinson Dance Ensemble... I auditioned and they took me. ... I was there for ten years.

Major Influences

At the age of twenty-nine, Gary joined the Cleo Parker Robinson Dance Ensemble. This proved an invaluable experience for him providing the opportunity to work with African-American dance legends Donald McKayle, Talley Beatty, Eleo Pomare, James Truitte, and Katherine Dunham.

> She (Cleo) exposed us to so many choreographers. But I was mainly influenced by Donald, because I first saw his work with the Ailey Company, when I was living in Atlanta. And I just fell in love with the humanity and how humane it was And intelligent...and beautiful and artistic. It was very sumptuous and rich. Everything he talked about had a point of intelligence. And so I fell in love with all his stuff. I think the thing that struck me about Donald one of the things is his intelligence. How he worked with dancers in a really, really personal way, that he got that stuff out. He had, of course, his vision on what a ballet was. But somehow, he'd work out all of his visions on your body and he would bring all of your strengths forward. So even though you were doing his choreography, your talents were really challenged.

The experience working with Donald McKayle set the tone for the choreographer Gary would become and what he would expect from the dancers in his company. Gary was inspired by Donald's ability, as a Black male dancer to achieve success in the dance world as well as in his personal life.

> The big thing that influenced me was the way he worked with his dancers. He's very, very cool. There was very little, there was almost no tension, unless you were screwing up in his rehearsals, and you were screwing up in a way that didn't make sense. Then he would address that. He's an activist for dancers. He takes care of you. You go into theater situations and if something's not right in the theater, he addresses it. He makes sure that the dancers are comfortable.

> I love the fact that he has a family. And that he was a working husband and father during that time he was a choreographer, also. And that he made a life out of being a choreographer and a dancer. And that he made an example out of that. A lot of people were not even aware that you could do that. That you could live a life, and have a car and house and family.... Being a dancer and choreographer, he was a wonderful example of that... Because he did a lot of things in Hollywood and on Broadway that Black male dancers were not necessarily to find or believed they could do. So those are some of the things that attracted me to him...and his beautiful choreography.

Gary was also influenced by choreographers Talley Beatty and Eleo Pomare. One only has to watch *Mourner's Bench* to realize Gary's appreciation for the depth and difficulty of Talley's choreography.

> Talley...was just his tenacity. The audaciousness of choreography and the depth...and how hard it is. (chuckle). You know.... And the quickness and how you must have a specific amount of talent in order to bring things out, and how he liked the quick, fast dancers. I loved that about him. That was one thing I learned from him.

Eleo Pomare's choreography reflected his willingness to take risks and create choreography about sensitive subjects. Gary was inspired by Eleo's teaching style as it drove him to set high standards for himself.

> Eleo...it was his gall (chuckle). It was his gall and some of the things he would say to you to get you to do whatever his vision was. It was just amazing to me...to be in the presence of a man who was willing to say whatever he needed to say to get you to do that dance. Not that he's the only one, but he was...to know that he sets that goal and that standard for himself. And he inspires that around his dancers.

As a Cleo Parker Robinson Dancer, Gary was exposed to the great African American dance legends Donald McKayle, Talley Beatty, Eleo Pomare and Katherine Dunham. The opportunity to perform the choreography of the greats would certainly set the standards for the man he was to become and his future as a gifted and brilliant choreographer.

Choreographic Approach

Gary claims that although he has always been a choreographer, he made the official transition from dancer to choreographer when he became Associate Artistic Director of Deeply Rooted Dance Theater in 1995.

> I've always been a choreographer. But when I came to Deeply Rooted, I made that transition where my life was totally focused toward choreographing and running a dance company, even though I never wanted a company. It just kind of happened because of what we (Gary and Iega) wanted to do.

Gary's approach to working with dancers is modeled after his own positive experiences with choreographers. He wants his dancers to be comfortable with the process and to feel the heightened sense of spirituality that he has felt. He wants them to become more aware and have an increased sense of observation. He wants them to feel inspired and "I want them to feel that they are saying what I want them to say."

> I want them (the dancers) to feel truthful in their expression. I want them to feel as though, that this doesn't happen as much as I want it to happen. I want them to feel comfortable inside of the process that has brought them to that place.... What I want them to feel is comfort, feel inspired. I want them to feel that they are saying what I want them to say. Like I felt when I was doing other people's choreography. I want them to feel the way that I feel, heightened spiritually. You know, I want them to feel that's why I do it. I want them to feel a heightened sense of spirituality, and a heightened sense of observation.

The Human Connection

Gary maintains an ever present concern for humanity. He expressed that the human connection is God's plan for bringing human beings together to communicate and understand one another. The medium of dance enables the dancer to make those strong emotional, spiritual, and physical connections Gary refers to.

> The human connection. Sitting in a room all day by yourself and coming out and connecting with people. That's part of God, it's part of his fellowship. You have to do that. You have to touch and you have to communicate. You have to feel other people, you have to do that. That's part of our spiritual and physical makeup. So it's normal and it's natural...Now, it's harder to make that human connection. It's harder so empathizing with people is a little bit more hard, now because you're not engaging anymore. People are not out there engaging as much as they want to and dance is all about engaging. It's about touching. It's about having your face in places, like whew! You know. It's all about that. It's all about that human element of communication, of empathizing.

Social Awareness/The Human Condition

The question of whether the artist has a social responsibility is an on-going

subject. Deeply Rooted Dance Theater is grounded in this mission. In a performance review, one dance critic described the choreography as "a fusion of the arts and social justice" (Weiss, 2005, p. W7). Gary believes that what makes the company unique is that he and Artistic Director Kevin Iega Jeff are aware of the human condition. As an African-American artist, Gary believes it his responsibility to speak about social issues through dance and provoke awareness in the audience with his choreography.

> We're very aware of the human condition. We're very aware of who we are as African Americans in this country....
>
> We know what being disenfranchised means, so we have a heightened sensitivity to that, so that informs the work that we do. We feel that we need to say the things that we need to say.
>
> As an artist it's your responsibility to say that. And by saying some of the things that get people thinking about it whether you're saying it well or not, the fact that you're just saying it is your responsibility....
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> You have to figure out a way to deal with that. I think as artists that we do. So that's what I think we do. We're out there to provoke and to help people see and to invite people to our process so they can actualize what it is that they want to get from society and from themselves. That's the thing that I am most proud of is that we're here to actually provoke and actualize people's consciousness.
>
> Art changes the world and at the end of all civilization what's left is art. Once everything's crumbled down, you'll find an art piece that talks about what happened in that specific time, that specific civilization. So, that's what I think we do. We talk about things we feel are important and invite other people to talk about it. We want them to be provoked.

Art has always been one means for people to express their views and make social commentary. Gary feels that by utilizing dance to speak about important issues, one can open up a dialogue to create a conversation. You don't have to have an experience to talk about it, but you have to be aware of it. As long as you're aware and as long as you're impacted. Because you can't talk about something that hasn't impacted you. I don't understand everything that I'm trying to say about a particular point, but I know the point exists, and I know that it needs to be said...So, you are opening up a dialogue to create a conversation.

Learning Through Dance

The dance experience is about more than the act of dancing. To be a dancer requires the discipline needed to practice long hours to perfect one's technique or to aster choreography. But Gary believes that being open, honest and truthful in one's expression is an additional requisite. The dancer can learn much about his/her own constitution while contributing to society in the process.

> It goes back to the whole thing that I was talking about. That dance is a truthful sort of thing. It brings on stage a truth and honesty, regardless of what it is you're trying to say. It brings onstage truthfulness of body and the fact that the process that brings dancers onstage, I think is an elevated process, because you have to be disciplined and you have to have a certain need and desire to do that. I think if you don't have the need and desire, then you can't really contribute to society. There's an art found in all of them that helps you contribute to society. That helps society to grow because of that contribution. Is that kind of clear? (Starting with the youth

and educating them to continue.) And they continue to take that forward and pass on traditions.

Gary agrees that it is important to know one's history so that one can learn from the past. The African-American pioneers in dance paved the way for the future of all African-American artists in modern dance. Gary is proud to carry on this legacy through his choreography.

> Oh, yes. There's the old adage, 'If you don't learn from the past, then you're bound to repeat it.' If you don't bring those traditions with you, because they're there for a reason, somebody has to keep that. Somebody has to be the historian. And we owe it to ourselves to refer to that. To know what it took and to know where things came from. Cause everything came from someplace else. There are now new steps. here really are not. The way you say them...is new. You know, somebody's done that. Somebody carved out those niches. Tradition makes you aware there was work involved and that somebody else was here.
>
> There were other people doing this before you got here. Mr. Ailey was doing all this...Donald was here, Miss Dunham was here and Miss Primus was here. Other people were digging this hole for us so that we could stand up and stick out heads above the hole and see what's going on. So, if you don't have the traditions, then you don't have those people. It negates everything that they've done in the past. It negates who you are. We already as Black people, have a hard time because we don't know who we are. We arrived here, on this land, out of sense we knew who we were. But all of
>
> that was discarded and beaten out of us and taken away. You know, because of the process of our being here...So, if we don't hold onto the few traditions that we have, then we'll never find out who we are. We'll never be able to stand up with our heads above the hole because we won't know what's holding us up. We won't know who's been down here pushing us up. So somebody has to do it. I'm happy that we do it, very happy.

New Perspective

Gary believes that dance plays a role in not only educating students but also in educating society as a whole. It is important for Gary to relate the African-American experience through dance.

> Educating the students. Educating society as a whole. Educating the people who come to see us....Educating people about the art of dance. About the artist's experience, the African American artist's experience, all of it. It goes back to the whole thing that I was talking about.

Gary was fortunate to have dance in his life as an alternative to succumbing to otherwise negative influences. He has found that dance can help young people by giving them a new perspective on life.

> Oh, yeah. Dance changed me. That's what it did to me. It took me, because actually I was on the brink of not doing well. I was into a lot of stuff that kids get into, you know, drugs and hanging around with bad people.
>
> I teach in different situations all over the country. And specifically in this little town in Cheylette, WY where they have an enormous amount of problems. I teach White kids African dance. To watch them achieve something they thought was foreign, they were like, I can't do that. When they attempt it and actually do it, to watch them change, because it changes them instantly. It really does because regardless of whether you want it to or not, your view is changed. You're not going to see the same things you saw before I taught you how to do the *Yan Va Lou.* I teach in all these different communities. Once you make that initial contact and once you introduce them to something that's new that they find they can also do and participate in, that opens up a challenge. And come away with something, all sorts of stimuli from all sorts of places, all sorts of artistic things, they open up and see differently.

Gary agrees that dance is the universal language because all cultures dance. He has experienced this firsthand, performing internationally in Switzerland, Spain, and Canada. Gary maintains that dance is one way humans communicate.

> Dance is the universal language. Oh, yeah, and I think all cultures dance. Everybody has a little step they do in their culture and when you hear the music, you have to move. I think that it's the way that we as humans have communicated, a way that we have used to communicate ideas and situations. I think that it's always been inside of us to move and to know that's communication and say something.

Spiritually Liberating

How does Gary feel when he dances? Gary feels liberated and free. He also refers to a heightened sense of spiritual awareness. Gary becomes the instrument of expression, taking on the character he is portraying in the dance. In African tradition, the artist is considered "chosen" as the conduit of the divine (Welsh Asante, 2001, p. 145). Gary feels blessed to have been chosen as the instrument of expression for the creative spirit.

> When I was dancing, it was liberating. It depended on what I was doing. It depended on the role. Sometimes, if it was a role that was a specific character...I became completely immersed in the character. You just get immersed in the character and you become that character for that moment in time. It's such a heightened sort of spiritual awareness of what's going on in your body. It's like housing two people when you're doing something like that. You have to be the dancer to get through the ballet and you have to create the personality, the persona that you're portraying onstage. It's like heightened spirituality, it's spiritual awareness, awareness of the spirit...that there's more to it than just this, you know. I feel like I'm actually an

> instrument or a spirit. Or I'm observing my spirit or I'm experiencing it. Does that make sense?

Gary believes that everything he does comes from God and that it is God who guides him in the choreographic process. Gary feels blessed to be chosen as the instrument for the creative act and hopes that he can inspire people through his work.

> It makes me appreciative, highly appreciative. It makes me feel just ...blessed, you know, that I can do that. That I can chill out enough so that the spirit can get all this stuff out. That I was the actual instrument to make that happen. You know, it makes me feel really, really good. And I'm hoping people feel inspired when they see it.
>
> I'm one of these people, I know everything I do comes from God. I have to...I don't know where those steps come from...I swear. It's just in there and all of a sudden I'm doing things, you know, and all of a sudden it makes sense. And all of a sudden, it's beautiful. I'm like, look (chuckle). I really am, and so I listen to that, you know. I listen to what's out there. I try to open myself up and relax. And just let go, you know. If it's for me to speak about it, I speak about it. And if it's not, I try to stay away from it. I try to do what inspires me and what I think is important and relevant.

Gary believes that "dance is probably the most honest thing you can do." With the body as the instrument of expression that performs the work, the dancer exposes him/herself completely to the world. The choreographer is responsible for creating a message and the performer is responsible for relaying that message to the audience.

> I think dance is probably the most honest thing that you can do. Because you can only be what you are at that moment. If you can only be what you

> are....there's no edit, no cut and paste, there's no let's re-shoot, there's no cut...there's no anything like that. When the curtain opens you're standing right there. You are what you are. It's the ultimate way to find out what you really are made of. When it opens up and everybody's sitting there watching what you're going to do, you know, you've got to be intelligent enough to bring everything you've learned onstage. And be strong enough and smart enough and fearless enough to do it. And let all of these other people who are dancing with you, depend on you and also, almost be an example of what other people may be looking at. Other kids....kids who are looking at you. I mean, it brings out all that fearlessness, responsibility, intelligence, all of that stuff you have to do to be onstage.

A Passion for Dance

Gary has a passion for dance. He dances because it is what he loves to do. The dance experience is a liberating one and allows Gary to be free. But he never loses sight of that and remains humble and grateful.

> I do what I love. And that puts me in my place. That puts everything in perspective. I think about how I don't have to go out and do something that I don't want to... .That's what dance has given me, it has freed me

For Gary, performing on stage was also a transforming experience. He describes actually becoming the character he was portraying.

> It depended on what I was doing. It depended on the role. Sometimes, if it was a role that was a specific character....I became completely immersed in the character. You just get very immersed in the character and you become that character for that moment in time.

Gary compares the feeling he experiences when seeing his choreography to that of a proud parent watching his child. He hopes his choreography will be an inspiration to others when they see it.

> It humbles me. It freaks me out, because I can't believe what I...it's like having a really beautiful baby (chuckle). And everybody's going...oh look how pretty your baby is and your baby's so smart. Or your baby can walk, I mean it's like that. It humbles me and gives me a lot of pride. It makes me appreciative, highly appreciative. It makes me feel just...blessed, you know, that I can do that. That I can chill out enough so that the spirit can get all this stuff out. That I was the actual instrument to make that happen. You know, it makes me feel really, really good. And I'm hoping people feel inspired when they see it.

Gary describes the choreographic experience as one in which he takes what is in his heart and soul and makes it come to life through his choreography.

> The interesting thing about choreography is...and I don't even know if this translatable. I don't know if I can articulate this. It's how you take something that is in your brain and it's in your heart and in your soul, and to manifest it into something that is physical. It's like a physical dream.

Self-Actualization

Gary's world was transformed when he became a dancer. As associate artistic director for Deeply Rooted Dance Theater, Gary has found personal gratification through his work. Dance has given him a sense of worth and value.

> Becoming what you want to be. Becoming what you say you want to be. Becoming more than what you say you want to be. Discovering that you're actually bigger than you thought you were. And that's the trip for me. That's what dance does for me. It helped me discover that I'm big, a much

> bigger person than I thought I was. So it makes you valuable. It gives you a sense of your value, also.

Inspired and Enlivened

Gary is completely inspired by life, much of the inspiration for his choreography coming from everyday situations and people he has encountered. He pays close attention to what people do and listens carefully to what they say.

> There's a businessman in there that I talk to everyday whose life is like, our lives are totally different, but at the same time I watch what it is that he does. But what I was able to do, what I was blessed to do, is hear what it is that they were saying about their lives and be able to articulate it onstage. I think that I did a service for all of us, you know, to be able to do that. I think it's a blessing for me to be able to put those things and to articulate them into movement and have other people look at it. Situations that I've become inspired by and enlivened by.

Gary's inspiration for *Hand to Mouth* came from feeling empowered to make a difference in the lives of the people who had suffered great devastation and loss because of the tsunami in Indonesia. The plight of the people left homeless in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina further intensified the message behind the piece.

> *Hand to Mouth* was inspired because of that whole tsunami situation. First all, was devastating to everybody...but to find out that there were people who nobody was really trying to support, was even more devastating. It was very sad.

> (And the hurricanes) That all became part of doing it. It all happened during this whole creative process of *Hand to Mouth.* It was a very difficult piece for me to get out, because…I didn't necessarily want it to be one of those pieces where you go, oh, Lord, poor babies. I wanted it to be something that would provoke and make you think about what's going on. Something that would inspire you to do something about other folks in need and need to be aware of other people's plights and how lucky we are to be able to sit right here and talk about this. To sit right here in this building that has been for, I don't know how long…and other people don't even have buildings that have been there for two hundred years. Or situations where they never even had a house they lived in for two months.

Gary, along with Artistic Director of Deeply Rooted Dance Theater, Kevin Iega Jeff, were inspired to create *Jagged Ledges* to empower all of the people who are afflicted with the disease HIV/AIDS with feelings of hope. Iega adds, "That while it is devastating, it's also a very hopeful place to live…because you find out so much more about your life, when you are confronted with your death." (Iega Jeff, Dance workshop, 2006).

> Even though you come with perceived…*Jagged Ledges*, that we talked about, there are characters in there that are people that I've worked with and people that I know. *Jagged Ledges* is about the plight of people living with HIV/AIDS and the soul's quest for freedom.

Gary is empowered by being able to inspire people through his choreography. He feels a sense of value in being able to reach out and touch so many people's lives with his work.

> When I look at all the people that I've given back, all the people that I've touched, I'm like, this is really a trip. While I'm sittin' at home trippin' because of whatever, there are people who are thinking that Deeply Rooted

> said such and such and so...so it makes you valuable. It gives you a sense of your value, also.

Leaving a Legacy

Gary Abbott is highly gifted and an inspiration to all of the dancers who have performed his choreographic works. His artistry resonates reaching out to his audiences, engaging them and provoking an awareness in them of issues that are relevant to society. Above all, he is a real person who touches the hearts and souls of everyone he meets. When I asked Gary how he would like to be remembered by the dance world he responded,

> Someone who was almost like a servant, someone who was actually of service to society and to the world. And who gave what he could in his dance and in his teaching to facilitate the human connection. To open up the channels to talk and to exchange.... That's what I want, as a servant. To serve the arts, to serve society through my blessings, my artistic blessings, my artistic talent. That's it.

Summary

Gary claims that he was always a dancer. Upon reflection, many individuals who embark upon a career in dance will find this to be true. Gary was fortunate to discover his own passion for dance but he did not begin studying until the age of nineteen. Gary's natural talent and discipline provided the tools enabling him to audition for and work with major professional dance companies. While dancing

with the Cleo Parker Robinson Dance Ensemble, Gary was influenced by the teachings and choreography of some of the great African-American legends in dance. These positive experiences set the foundation that helped build the man Gary is today. He has enjoyed a successful career as a performer, choreographer and teacher.

The qualities that stand out most about Gary come from a humanitarian and spiritual dimension. He is concerned with the well-being of his dancers and their understanding of the dance experience. Gary wants his dancers to find truthfulness and honesty in their expression. As a performer, he believes that dance brings out that truthfulness and fearlessness helping the individual to find out who they are. According to Gary, dance is the most honest thing you can do. As a choreographer, Gary believes it is the artist's responsibility to speak out about social issues and provoke awareness in society. He is proud to carry on the tradition of perpetuating the legacy of African-Americans in dance and inspired by those who came before him.

As described in the African tradition of dance by Welsh Asante (2001), the choreographer is chosen to be a conduit of the creative force. Gary believes that he has been chosen as an instrument of expression by a higher force and is thankful and humbled by the experience. Gary feels proud when watching the dancers perform his choreography, like a parent witnessing a child. In describing how the dance

experience makes him feel, Gary proclaims that he feels liberated, transformed, and free.

Germaul Yusef Barnes

Background

Germaul Yusef Barnes, Artistic Director of Viewsic Expressions, describes his background in dance as being very diverse. A native of Phoenix, Arizona, he attended South Mountain School of the Arts, where he studied in ballet, jazz, and tap. He went on to perform in *A Chorus Line,* and *Guys and Dolls* with Pacific Conservatory of the Performing Arts. Upon being awarded a full dance scholarship, Germaul continued his dance studies at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia. Although Germaul was accepted at Juilliard, NYU and Irvine, he chose the University of the Arts because it had the most diverse program. Influenced by Milton Myers, Germaul continued to broaden his scope of dance by performing with Philadanco, Movement Source Inc, and Group Motion Dance Company.

Professional Work

Germaul has choreographed for numerous dance groups in New York, Phoenix, Cleveland, Toronto, and South Africa. He was the recipient of The Artist Exploration Grant, in 2003, sponsored by Arts International, a grant to support his work in Ghana, West Africa. Germaul has received many commissions for new

dances for Judson Memorial Church, Aaron Davis Hall, Phoenix Arts Commission, PS 122, Danspace Project, Dance Now Downtown; Saratoga Arts Gallery, and others. His collaboration with South African composer Bongani Ndodana produced the opera-oratorio *Uhambo* that premiered at the Standard Bank National Arts Festival in Graham Town, South Africa. Germaul directed and performed the opera L'Historie du Soldat with Ensemble Noir in Toronto. In addition, Germaul is artist-in-residence for Movement Source Inc. Dance Company in Phoenix, Arizona.

First Encounters

Germaul has received critical acclaim as a dance instructor in the prominent dance academies: Tanz Fabric, Ballet Centrum, Skidmore College, University of Buffalo and Ghana National Dance Theater. He is currently on the faculty at the Harkness Dance Center in New York. It was at the Black College Dance Exchange, in 2004, on the campus of Fisk University, that I first encountered Germaul Barnes. He was teaching a modern dance class and had clearly captivated the attention of all of the students. Germaul's class focused on the development of core strength, alignment and artistic expression that is unmatched by his personality. After class, I asked Germaul if he would allow me to interview him for my research study. Although his schedule was full because he was teaching classes, he agreed to meet me in the lobby of the Embassy Suites Hotel in Nashville, TN. At seven o'clock sharp on the evening of April 3, 2004, he arrived meticulously dressed in an African

kaftan, looking as if he were ready to perform on stage. The atmosphere of the lobby was very energetic, which Germaul seemed to enjoy. Although the noise level was relatively high, with live music playing in the background, Germaul spoke clearly into the tape recorder and remained focused on my questions.

Viewsic Expressions

In 1991, Germaul founded VE-Viewsic Expressions Dance Company, a multi-media production company, whose mission is to promote and present dance performances, art exhibitions and educational residencies (Barnes, 2006). He spoke of a work he was developing about the living legends of dance called, *Sticks, Straw and Stone Project,* based on the fable from *The Three Little Pigs* and the tradition of how to build a stronger house. The piece utilizes the talents of different choreographers who set their work on Germaul, along with a combination of video and commentary. A dialogue between Germaul, the choreographers and the audience follows the performance to discuss how the African American dance legends have influenced American modern dance.

Honing His Craft

Germaul moved to Berlin in 1993 and toured with Tolada Dance Company, teaching throughout Europe, in Germany, Finland, Belgium and France, for the next three years. He described his experience with the company as being a wonderful

performing opportunity with great pay. Realizing it was time to get back into class to "hone his craft," Germaul returned to the States, in 1995, to join the Cleo Parker Robinson Dance Ensemble in Colorado, and had the good fortune to work with the African-American legends in dance.

> So it was a real home, you know, bringing in the living legends. And so that was very inspiring for me, because I was able to work hands on with them, and have a personal dialogue with these artists. These people that I've admired all my life, you know, and to actually do their work and see their philosophy and to form relationships with them.

Social Responsibility

Germaul has worked with many African-American choreographers who created provocative works addressing social issues. Eleo Pomare, Donald McKayle, Milton Myers, and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar are choreographers who have created dance works with strong social themes. Germaul reflected on the idea of the responsibility of the artist being a social responsibility.

> And I feel, that in what I've gathered from these choreographers...that we are living in this world, and we are living in this time and place, and anything we do has some kind of consciousness....Of the social place that we're living in....being in the past, the present, or the future. But there is a social thing, now....

Germaul believes it is the responsibility of the artist to have dialogue about issues that are sensitive. Dance provides a platform for speaking out and creating awareness.

As a member of The Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company, Germaul had experience performing choreographic works that made political statements or dealt with sensitive issues. Germaul was inspired by Bill's ability to continually challenge himself as a choreographer and as a performer.

> I think the artists that I've been working with and interviewing, in so many ways is a very social thing. They, themselves are already political, they don't have to kind of influx anything....like, bringing a statement, as far as you know, being an African-American person in a White society in a modern dance society is already political.
>
> And this is what Bill talks about in his choreography. And his choreography is so.... accessible....to a larger stream of modern dance out from the Black experience....that him alone, his way of speaking and where he is....is already political so that he doesn't even have to work at it. We have a social responsibility to have dialogue about issues that are sensitive, You know, sex....race.
>
> I've been with Bill for eight years. And kind of going back to him just being him, is a message. But he is so much of a person who is constantly challenging himself and reinventing, and not being stuck in an aesthetic that is familiar....and that people want to see what Bill T. Jones is....trying to challenge and really just trying to identify with the world. That I don't know if he only goes for things with messages....he's inspired by....

As Katherine Dunham's assistant, Germaul was very much aware of the social and political tension that became the subject of the choreography at the time. The choreographers used dance as a vehicle to express what needed to be said.

> I just went to a lecture with Miss Dunham and someone asked her that same question...what is *Southland* about? Was that a political statement? And she would say, 'Well, the climate where it was at the time it was created, and the story that came out of that....' I think she felt she needed to say

> something about it, but not necessarily did she have in mind a political stance on that....on that event, in Birmingham, and the lynching of the man whistling to the white woman, you know. But it was very much what she wanted to express.

Spirituality

Germaul's choreography is informed by a spirituality within himself and his connection to the world we live in. Germaul remains inspired by the presence of African-American dance legend Katherine Dunham and her influence in his life. Germaul spoke of the many ways Miss Dunham influenced his career. One thing she imparted in Germaul was the importance of being more than a technical dancer. She encouraged him to become an artist who knew how to express himself intelligently and artistically. At the time of the interview, Miss Dunham was still alive. Katherine Dunham passed away on May 21, 2006.

> Oh, how is she continuing to influence me? Oh, so much. The spiritual and the presence and the principles of what she has honed in as her style and technique....Other than just trying to be power technicians....instead of just going through things. Like how to preserve ourselves and how to think.
>
> So, what she has given me in so many ways, and I don't know why I was chosen....you know, for her to give me this gift. You know, I'm always amazed being around her....because I'm not from that world. I'm not really from the....I guess, I can say that....the dance world is big.
>
> But I've never, uh, considered it a very conscious choice to be a Black dancer. You know that story. I want to be known as a dancer, as a person. Miss Dunham encourages that. Miss Dunham really encourages people to be artists....artists,

> articulate, intelligent artists. And that's something that I'm so in awe about....that she has shared that gift with me. And how to formulate your expression.

Reflection

As a professional choreographer and director for his own company, Viewsic Expressions, Germaul's focus is on creating a dialogue between the audience and the choreographer.

> I have a production company. And so what I've kind of developed, is to have the different choreographers set a two-five minute work on myself, for an evening work, with video and commentary of the choreographers and the work in process. And a little dialogue between the audience and the choreographers and myself and how these Legends have influenced American modern dance....and how have African-American males and choreographers influenced American modern dance, the *Sticks, Stones, and Straw Project.*

Germaul was excited to talk about one of his more recent choreographic works, *Invisible Gates.* He had been dancing for fifteen years straight without a break, going from one company to the next, when he suffered a knee injury. While recuperating from knee surgery, Germaul had time to reflect on his own life.

> Who are you....what's your own voice....and what can you do as a person to eliminate all these restrictions and apprehensions that we have as humans. How can I help eliminate these self-restrictions that we put on ourselves. If we could eliminate some of those barriers, the things that we can accomplish....is beyond....beyond the perspective of your own self. *Invisible Gates* is the In –IN/visible Gates. So in the visible, or *Invisible Gates*, so if we can eliminate these restrictions, we can do whatever we like.

> We can accomplish anything we put our minds to and our bodies and our spirits. Who are you? What's your own voice? And what can you do as a person to eliminate all these restrictions and apprehensions that we have as humans.

Germaul wants to bring awareness to society through his choreography. He believes that in order to accomplish that, it is necessary to understand who we are first. Eliminating barriers that restrict us will enable us to pursue our goals. Germaul agrees that it is important for the audience to understand what the choreographer is trying to express and that the audience is part of the experience.

> I have tried to do works where the audience didn't matter, and I'm not that type of person because, I feel like, and what I've been taught...is that we're all in this together. Even the audience is part of this participation of the art If you're only doing this for yourself, then just do it for yourself, stay in the studio.

Honest and True

The source of inspiration for Germaul's choreography comes from developing what he has absorbed through life experiences. He believes that a choreographer can only create from what he/she knows. What is important to Germaul is being honest and truthful to one's expression.

> It's all good to me. I grab from what feeds me. You know, we only express and create from the information that we know and information that we try to develop in ourselves. He describes his own choreography as being very diverse. I can say what is European to contemporary....from dance ....to African to ballet to jazz and all this....and to move to say something in your body and be honest and true to your own expression....and being aware of who you are and the environment that you live in....helps a lot. In choreography, in my works....and it seems that is something that I try to hone.

> That is something that is not so perfected. You know, I'm working on that. That's something that I want to be a student, now (chuckle). How to perfect my craft and my voice, you know, in my choreography.

Educating through Dance

Germaul approaches teaching from an historical perspective. He stresses the necessity for a component in dance education that teaches dance majors about the legends and their influence on modern dance. "I was shocked by going to these universities with masters and dance programs not knowing who the Donald McKayles are, not knowing the Eleo Pomares and if they are still alive and their influence."

In October 2005, I invited Germaul to be a guest teacher at Chicago State University. He spoke to the students about his life as a dancer and the influence of the African-American dance legends. The students at Chicago State were not only impressed by his words of wisdom, but also by his exciting career and innovative choreography. Germaul enjoyed working with the students, as well, and asked to come back in the future. Germaul returned to Chicago State University on February 26, 2007. As he shared his knowledge and dance technique, Germaul was achieving his goal, "To continue the legacy of modern dance....at the same time understanding where it's going....where it's come from and where it's going." He was an inspiration to all.

Creating a Legacy

Germaul is a contemporary pioneer in modern dance. His mission is not only to continue the legacy of those who came before him, but also to forge boundaries and create new history.

> To continue the legacy of modern dance....at the same time understanding where it's going....where it's come from and where it's going. It's all that we hold. We have the power to be transcendent of whatever we do.... and to make this a craft that is appreciated and humanistic and not isolated and elitist from the world.

Germaul indicated the people sitting across from us, the man playing his guitar.

> We're living and breathing....and we're part of this. We're dancing....we're partners....we're not separate from this. We're here. Dance is a form that we can articulate to express ourselves....but it's about this.

Summary

Germaul, a very talented young dancer was already performing in musical theater right out of high school. He was serious about pursuing a career in dance and very selective about his choice to study at the School of the Arts in Philadelphia, because it offered a diverse program, although he had been accepted at Juillard, NYU, and Irvine. This decision lead Germaul to dance with Group Motion, a modern dance company that took him around the world. He also danced with Philadanco, a feeder company into Ailey.

Germaul joined the Cleo Parker Robinson Dance Ensemble as Gary Abbott was just leaving, ten years later. It is no coincidence that the experience imparted in Germaul many of the same qualities Gary spoke about. Germaul described Cleo's as being a "real home" and of the opportunities to learn from and have a dialogue with the African-American legends in dance. Germaul was very influenced by Cleo and her commitment to bring the dance legends to work with her dance company.

Of particular inspiration for Germaul, was Katherine Dunham, whose spirituality and presence continue to inspire him. She created a sensibility in the Dancers, encouraging them to become more than power technicians, but artists who knew how to express themselves intelligently and artistically. When Miss Dunham chose Germaul to be her assistant, he remained humbled by the opportunity expressing: "I don't know why I was chosen by her to give me this gift."

Germaul is very conscious about creating choreography that addresses social issues. He believes that the artist has a responsibility to talk about issues that are a bit sensitive. Perhaps this is Germaul's way of giving back as others have given to him. "I've been very fortunate in my life; the universe has been there."

Chapter Summary

Dance as Prescription examines the role of dance as a way to create awareness of social issues, and in some cases, create change. The artists in this study, as well as many noted African-American artists, believe dance is an effective

medium for raising awareness of social issues. They believe that it is their responsibility to do so, their choreography and philosophical beliefs indicating this. Jawole takes risks with her choreography in dealing with personal and social issues. Charles uses his choreography not only to create awareness of problems the community is facing, but also to make his audience realize they are responsible for solving these problems. Gary addresses social issues in his choreography to provoke the audience into awareness that it could happen to them. Germaul creates works with social topics to stimulate a discussion. The medium of dance has been used to expose social injustice and inequality. Choreography can be an effective medium in fostering the reflective discourse necessary to create awareness and in some instances, change. The artists in this study, as well as many noted African-American artists, believe dance is an effective medium for raising awareness of social issues, and believe that it is their responsibility to do this.

CHAPTER 7

THE DANCE EXPERIENCE

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the role dance making has played and continues to play for some African-Americans artists and educators. How do these African-American professional dancers, choreographers and dance educators perceive the medium of dance 1) as a voice to tell their stories, communicate, and create social awareness and 2) as a way to create meaning from these experiences.

Within the individual life histories of the twelve dancers, choreographers, and educators, three areas were of particular interest in this study: 1) Why, how, and what do these African-American dancers choreograph about; 2) How does the dance experience provide meaning for them; and 3) What are their perceptions of the meaning of "Black Dance." Chapter 9 will explore the third question in detail. Although the life histories contain data used to examine the three areas of investigation, the results are subject to multiple frames of analyses. There is no one process or motivation employed in the choreographic act. The complexity of the analysis is further complicated by the fact that the subjects' processes and products cross over into other categories making it difficult to separate them.

With that in mind, in the first area of investigation, Why, How, and What Do These African-American Dancers Choreograph About, three categories emerged to describe how the subjects view the role of dance choreography: Dance as Description, Dance as Educational Discourse, and Dance as Prescription.

In the category, Dance as Description, the subjects used their choreography to tell stories, express emotions, describe life experience, and entertain. The category, Dance as Educational Discourse, included choreography that was used to communicate, create a forum for discussion, and educate. The category, Dance as Prescription, included choreography that not only created awareness of social issues but also looked to affect change in society.

The second area of investigation, How Does the Dance Experience Provide Meaning for Them, generated the three categories: Dance as Empowering; Dance as Transforming; and Dance as Liberating. Within these categories, the following subcategories emerged: Emotional, Spiritual, and Physical.

The third area of investigation, What are Their Perceptions of the Meaning of "Black Dance" will be discussed in Chapter 9. This area disclosed the following three categories: The African-American Aesthetic, No to "Black Dance" as a separate genre, and Yes to "Black Dance."

Why, How, and What Do They Choreograph

Dance as Description

"In its beginnings, dance was something that we, as a community enjoyed. It was a way we told our stories." (Jones, in Birringer, 1998, p. 246)

Dance as Description is one way choreographers tell a story or make a statement. The oral tradition of storytelling, rooted in West African culture, was a way to hand down information from one generation to the next. The African griots used narratives and songs to preserve and pass on history. Dance was a custom through which Africans told stories, shared everyday experiences or celebrated life events (Lott, 2002). Many of the participants interviewed employ the African tradition of story telling to hand down life stories through the movements of dance. Of the twelve participants interviewed, the following choreographers primarily use dance to tell a story or make a statement. They believe dance should make sense and that the audience should be able to understand and enjoy the work.

Choreographers Randy Duncan, Kirby Reed, Mel Tomlinson, and Pierre Lockett believe it is important to have a message in their work and create dance with the intention that it will have meaning and impact the audience in some way, whether they are inspired or simply entertained by the dance. These choreographers are stimulated by life and use their experiences as one source for their work. They also draw upon emotional feelings that stem from these events and as an outlet and

release for their feelings.

"I have never been able to divorce the dancing from life." (Martha Graham in Gardner, 1993, p. 299)

Life and Emotions

Randy Duncan likes to tell a story in his work because he believes that it makes sense to the audience since they have been used to storytelling as children. He generally has something to say and does not choreograph for movement's sake. Randy always choreographs with a message and wants the audience to understand his work. The audience may not always interpret the message intended and may even have their own ideas. What is important to Randy is that the audience is engaged, inspired, and entertained by the dance. He is completely inspired by life and pays close attention to everything so that he can paint a nice picture onstage.

Life experience is a source of inspiration for his choreography and Randy draws from personal experience and observation. Choreographic works include *Sparring Partners,* which deals with issues of homosexuality; *Love Not Me*, a solo about a girl yearning for love in her life and her struggle to find it; *Bittersweet Ave*, which exposes the Rush Street scene as men and women parade about trying to see and be seen; and *Women's Work,* a comment on the strength and virility of women.

Randy summons personal feelings about death and anger, utilizing them to inspire his choreography and as an emotional outlet in *Turning Tides*. Randy

expresses the loss over so many talented artists to this disease and feelings of his own deep grief over the loss of mentor, Joseph Holmes to AIDS. Through these choreographic works, Randy has expressed the emotional feelings of grief, anger, yearning, and desperation.

Randy's choreography has changed through the years becoming more internal and less presentational, with the feeling coming from the inside. Randy makes the distinction between choreography that has a message from dance that is entertaining, the music being a determining factor. Randy refers to his piece, *Aretha,* which he describes as being presentational and really out there, screaming, "Look at me." This is in contrast to *Love Not Me,* which is very internal and forces the audience to look inside of the dancer's soul.

Although he does create pieces that are designed to be entertaining, as in *Aretha,* they most often still have a message. When choreographing, Randy usually begins with an idea, having a beginning and an ending in mind. The dancers play a role in the creative process sometimes determining what will happen in the middle. Although music may be inspiring, Randy can tell a story without the music there. Dance, as an outlet of emotion, is prior to music. The first music was composed or extemporized in order to accompany dancing. This is in line with the belief in African culture that movement emanates within the dancer, as opposed to being the result of external forces (Welsh Asante, 2001). Then Randy may tell the composer

what instruments he hears and the quality of music he is looking for to accompany his piece. Randy describes his style as the integration of many dance styles-jazz, modern, ballet, and African dance.

Kirby Reed does not necessarily believe all dance needs to be story-based but it does need to make sense. He feels the choreographic process is a chance to be creative and to push one's boundaries, maintaining that all dance does not have to be pretty to be appreciated. Kirby tries not to do crowd pleasers believing that the artist must remain true to himself. He generally begins with a concept, hearing the music in his head. Kirby does not pre think the movement but rather feeds off the energy of the dancers he is working with.

According to Kirby, it is a passion that connects the artist to the art. Everything that happens in life stimulates him creatively and he is inspired by both the good and the bad, using these experiences as subjects for his work. Kirby uses life and emotions to choreograph. He listens to the stories dancers tell and their experiences in the dance world to create his own choreographic works. 'Boys don't dance; men do' is the message behind *Snakes, Snails, and Puppy Dog's Tails.* In *Lies in a Bow,* Kirby creates a beautiful picture of deception based on his experience while in a relationship with a person who constantly fabricated lies.

Kirby has dealt with issues of betrayal in *Lies in a Bow*, identity in *Stereotypes*, feelings of desperation in *Descent,* and his brother's passing in *Forty*

Dollars. He believes that dance should be healing, and choreographed *The Alabaster Box* following the tragedy of September 11, as a way to comfort people.

Mel Tomlinson believes that dance is life and a reflection of the times. He finds that through dance, we can look at a history of the people by watching it on stage. Mel finds that dance tells the story of the history of a culture during a specific time, therefore, as life changes, dance changes. Reflecting on one's life gives meaning and purpose to it. For Mel, it has been an incredible journey. He finds what influences his work most is life experiences such as loss, pain, sorrow, and of course, joy. Mel believes the dancer must embrace all of life's experiences and personal feelings to enhance one's performance, while maintaining individualism. He explains that technique is the vehicle that gives the artist the freedom to express himself. Everything has been done before, but it is the way the artist creates the work that makes it unique. It is very personal and reflects the artist's feelings. Mel is very aware of the world around him and uses that in his performance. He stresses the importance of connecting to the audience and always making the audience believe.

Pierre Lockett believes it is important that the dance says something and makes a statement. For Pierre, dance is an artistic experience. He does maintain that at the professional level, the role of dance is to entertain. Pierre believes people go to ballet to be entertained and escape problems at home. He believes it is the

artist's responsibility for creating dance that has a purpose and making the audience understand the work. A piece that makes a powerful statement challenges the audience to reflect on what they saw. According to Pierre, dance is an outlet and if you are true to your feelings, the audience will understand what the artist is trying to convey. These feelings are conveyed through body language, facial expressions, and movement. Pierre maintains that the artist must bring realism to the performance.

When choreographing, Pierre draws from his experiences. He begins first by listening to a piece of music, then the words, and then he begins to move. Although Pierre realizes that it is the choreographer's job to create the dance, he feels the most important part of the process are the dancers who perform the piece. For Pierre, dance is more about attitude and presentation than simply the execution of steps. He draws from his own emotions to create a character on stage, asking himself, "How does betrayal feel...how would you react if you were in love?" Pierre believes choreography should make an emotional statement and have some emotional impact for the dancer and the audience.

For Pierre, life inspires art, and he draws from his life experiences as his inspiration, whether performing or choreographing. Pierre draws upon persona feelings and reactions to life experience using feelings of love in *Light Rain*, betrayal in *Othello*, the loss his brother in *Touch Me,* and the spiritual and emotional

energy of the Black church in *Go Children Go.* Although Pierre used feelings of love to arouse an emotional performance, he also referred to feelings of betrayal.

"Dance is making visible the interior landscape." (Martha Graham)

While most people may admit to feeling betrayed by someone at least once in their lifetime, the history of African Americans in this country has been one of great struggle and betrayal. It is not surprising that several of the participants harbor strong feelings of anger and resentment. Whether these feelings emanate from remembered, related, or embodied experiences that have been internalized, these feelings need to be released. Dance provides an outlet for these emotions. While the following choreographers employ the storytelling format, the motivation behind their work also emanates from an educative position: Joan Hamby-Burroughs, Iantha Tucker, Peter Fields, and Dianne Maroney-Grigsby.

Although Joan's choreography primarily emanates from an educative stance, for the purpose of this discussion, it is necessary to include Joan in this analysis. Joan has also used dance as an outlet for her emotions and admits that some of her choreography is an expression of the anger and resentment she experienced through racial discrimination. Growing up in Birmingham, Alabama in the 1950s, Joan was unable to take dance classes because training was unavailable at that time for Black children. It wasn't until she went to college that Joan was finally able to study dance, but was faced with discrimination again when she was hired to teach at a

primarily white high school. Joan's colleagues described one of her dances as being "an angry piece." It is not surprising her choreography reflected the anger Joan held inside as a reaction to the race hatred she experienced. Dance gave her the opportunity to express these feelings.

Iantha also uses dance to tell a story, but she takes an historical perspective in telling her stories from. She relates stories about slavery, the rigors of plantation living, and emancipation in *Genesis II.* Her dances also include works with religious themes as in *Religious Suite.* Iantha agrees that all dance does not have to have a strong social message and enjoys choreographing dances that are light and entertaining, inspired by many kinds of music. Iantha enjoys creating classical works and pas de deux, as well.

Peter takes a literary approach to his choreography in telling a story, maintaining that the dance must always have a thesis. Peter believes that choreography is an expression of life experience. Some of his work is based on situations he has witnessed or conversations he has overheard, his choreography being a reactions to these events. Peter addresses these issues in his choreography, whether they are feelings of betrayal in *Girls Night Out*, sexual harassment in *Sweet Hill,* or the homeless with *In the Park with Mattie.*

Dianne's choreography is also story-based and has a beginning, middle, and an end. Music is the primary source of inspiration behind her work, one of her favorite styles being gospel music. Many of the pieces she choreographs are of a

spiritual nature, as shown in *As Long as I Got Jesus.*

The following choreographers also tell a story but the motivation behind much of their choreography is of a prescriptive nature, to incite awareness of social issues or to affect change: Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, Gary Abbott, Charles Carter, and Germaul Barnes. Although much of Jawole's choreography is an expression of social awareness, she also uses dance to tell stories about personal experiences. *Girlfriend,* was inspired by Jawole's fond memories of college life and her roommates. She believes dance can serve many purposes and mean different things to different people. As an artist, Jawole appreciates a variety of dance styles and views dance as a form of entertainment, a deep artistic experience, or something that is simply beautiful to look at.

Gary takes a story-based approach in some of his choreography designed to convey a message to the audience. *Desire* portrays the attraction of individuals for each other and the primal impulse and urge of desire. Gary assures that life inspires a range of experiences and emotions in his work. As a choreographer, he is not limited to using one source of inspiration, but draws from all of life. In the first act of *Move* (2004), *The Club,* the audience is entertained by nocturnal beings who live life in the moment, the drama unfolding within the dance.

Germaul agrees with Randy, Kirby, Pierre, and Mel that it is important for the audience to understand what the choreographer is trying to express. He

maintains that the audience is part of the complete dance experience and a choreographer who does not care about the audience should limit his/her work to the dance studio. Germaul uses the fable, *The Three Little Pigs* to inspire his own work, the *Sticks, Straw and Stone Project.*

Charles uses a storytelling approach in his choreography with the intention to make the audience aware of problems that plague the African-American community, in particular. Charles likes to use different types of music and in contrast to much of his work, with a strong social context, he would like to create a beautiful piece the dancers and audience can simply enjoy. Charles had also choreographed musicals, including *The Wiz.*

Dance as Educative Discourse

> "If I could tell you what I mean, there would be no point in dancing."
> (Martha Graham)

The category, Dance as Educational Discourse, includes choreography to communicate, create a forum for discussion, cross cultures, and to educate about historical and religious influences. For many of the participants in this study, dance is the way they best communicate their thoughts. These artists use their bodies to not only express feelings but create a dialogue about these feelings. Dance can open

up a conversation about issues that may otherwise be difficult to discuss.

The following artists primarily use the medium of dance as Educational Discourse. Peter Fields uses choreography to communicate issues the community may be facing and dialogue with his students about these problems. Joan Hamby-Burroughs uses her choreographic skills in teaching multicultural students. Iantha Tucker takes an educative approach in her choreography to teach her students and the community about the history of African Americans. Dianne Maroney-Grigsby is inspired by gospel music to create choreographic works with a religious base.

Communication – Discourse

"The function of the dance is communication."
(Martha Graham quoted in Morrison-Brown, 1979, p. 50)

Dance is not only a way to express feelings and communicate ideas, but it can open up a dialogue for discussing issues. Choreography can create awareness about experiences and issues we all have and stimulate a discourse. The following participants believe that dance is one way to express feelings and create a forum for discussion.

Peter Fields believes that through dance, we can express feelings and communicate thoughts, the artist having the ability to share information and communicate current issues through choreography. Peter's choreography is always

based on an issue or feeling he needs to express. Troubled by the Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas Senate hearings, Peter used dance as a way to respond to his feelings in his piece *Sweet Hill.*

Many of the dances Peter creates are from life experience, a situation in which he was personally involved or became aware of by observing others. He draws on situations that have impacted not only his students, but society as well. He likes to challenge himself and his dancers with his work. What is important to Peter is that the work makes sense. The process he uses is much like that of a literary composition with a thesis statement, a beginning, middle, and ending. Peter approaches his teaching as a writer, focusing on observation skills, imagery, and structure. He requires his students to keep journals to help train their minds so they can create visual pictures. Peter encourages them to feel and listen to their inner selves before they begin moving.

Although Peter may choreograph abstract works, it is still important to him that the audience understand what he is trying to express. One way he makes sure of this is by providing program notes with the dances. As part of the educational component in his work, Peter has a "talk back" after the concert, to discuss situations brought to light by his choreography. *Girls Night Out* is one piece that brought out a lot of issues many students had experienced. Because many of the pieces Peter choreographs express real life issues, he provides the opportunity to

discuss these issues in class and make sense of them. He encourages students to draw from their experiences to choreograph and dialogue about these experiences.

The following artists have also used the medium of dance to communicate ideas and create a dialogue although their perspectives may come from different views: Germaul Barnes, Kirby Reed, and Gary Abbott. As a professional choreographer and director of his company, Viewsic Expressions, Germaul's focus is on creating a dialogue between the audience and the choreographer. He feels it is the artist's social responsibility to have a dialogue about issues that are sensitive. *Sticks, Straw and Stone Project* is one example of Germaul's effort to do this.

Kirby describes his choreography as an expression of his heart. He believes that dance can bring awareness to society by opening up a subject and having a dialogue about it. Kirby does not know how much change it can bring, but it can create a discussion.

Gary also feels that through dance one can open up a dialogue to create a conversation. He maintains that if one has been impacted by an experience, one's choreography can reflect that and provoke a discussion as in *Hand to Mouth.* Although some these choreographers use dance to stimulate a discussion, their perspective comes from a prescriptive nature, one that intends to provoke awareness in society and potentially create change. For others, dance is the medium through which they best communicate to the world. It is their language. "Dance is thought made visible" (Alonzo King, in Eichenbaum, 2004, p. 198).

Some choreographers use dance to tell a story, make a statement, or simply create a beautiful work of art. The role of dance is different for each person. For some, it may be a way to communicate to the world. Although Jawole may do all of the above, she describes dance as the way she best communicates to the world; it is her language. Many choreographers use personal experiences to create their works. For some, it may be a way to express events while others use their art as a purging of emotions. In *Girlfriends,* Jawole draws from her personal experiences to communicate feelings.

Communication is part of the human connection. Dance is a nonverbal form of communication in which dancers communicate using their bodies to convey feelings. According to Gary, human beings have to touch and communicate; it is part of our spiritual and physical make-up and God's plan. Charles agrees with Gary in that touching is vital for all humans; but for dancers, it is even more important. Charles believes dancers are different from most individuals because they live their art through their bodies. He finds that dancers communicate with their bodies even when they are not performing on stage. Dancer, choreographer, and ordained minister Mel Tomlinson communicates his message to people using movement and sign language to spread the word. He believes people need to hear what he has to say and he accomplishes this through movement.

Cross Cultures – Retain Culture

Before any formal language existed, dance was a means of communication (Sorell, 1967). Dance has been a way for some people to articulate their thoughts through movement. Some of the choreographers interviewed even consider dance to be the "universal language" capable of crossing cultures as a way to communicate.

The International Theatre Institute in Australia created International Dance Day as a way to celebrate all cultures through dance. Its mission is "To bring all dance together, to celebrate the art form and revel in its universality, to cross all political, cultural, and ethnic barriers and bring people together in peace and friendship with a common language-dance" (Ross, 2007).

Joan Burroughs believes that dance is a means of communication and that it is possible to create a meaningful interaction with people through dance. When teaching students from various cultural backgrounds who all spoke different languages, dance was the vehicle that brought the students together, enabling them to communicate through movement. Joan finds that teaching dance can provide a meaningful interaction and help students work cooperatively together by creating awareness and respect for other cultures. In addition to communicating with and learning about other cultures, the dance experience can socialize and form meaningful relationships. Joan finds that she is accepted into other cultures because of dance. She also feels that dance is sometimes the only form of expression that

allows people to see social problems and is also a good medium for people to overcome these issues.

Iantha Tucker finds that dance can bridge the gap between cultures because it automatically crosses those lines. "In many ways, it already has. Just because it is so pervasive in our society and it goes across cultural lines. Some people don't like to admit it, but it is there." Pierre agrees that, "People live in a society now, where traditions, cultural traditions are starting to cross lines."

Jawole Willa Jo Zollar agrees that dance is a great way to enjoy socializing with people from other cultures. When you are teaching a class and a person does not speak the language, then you have movement. "It's about the dancing, not about the language. You've just got to be in it together. And I think that's great, when you're dancing with someone socially, who doesn't speak your language."

Charles Carter believes that through dance we can educate our students by showing them this is definitely a multicultural society and that we have to work together. Charles conducts a community dance program in which he uses the medium of dance to discuss current issues. He views dance within this program as an educational tool to inform the public and to help make change in their lives. As for retaining cultural traditions, he believes that it happens automatically and is evidenced in hip-hop dance styles. In African dance, people dance in a circular formation. The social dances of today, are also performed in a circle at parties and in clubs, and use the African tradition of call and response. Charles pointed out that

through social forms of dance, such as hip-hop, people from other countries are able to learn about American culture. "The world is getting smaller...because they're starting to learn our culture and they're learning it through hip-hop."

Kirby Reed feels that one role of dance is to retain cultural traditions because it can show you the past, present, and future. He maintains that the social dancing of today is not what it used to be because our values have changed. What is done today would not have been acceptable in other times and Kirby feels that we need to look at the past to understand where we are and where we are headed. Kirby pointed out the similarities in today's hip-hop dance and African dance with the pelvic isolations of the body and the footwork. He believes that African dance should be given the respect and credit it deserves for the contributions it has made to many genres of dance. Kirby added, "Dance is so incestuous that it all pulls from something."

Iantha Tucker believes that we do retain culture through dance, although we may not be aware that we are doing. Each generation draws from the past to create new and transformed dances. "Things go in cycles. The more things change, the more they remain the same." She expressed how many African dance styles have been prevalent in dances throughout the years and can be recognized by going back in history and looking at the dances of various decades.

Gary Abbott agrees that it is important to know one's history so that one can

learn from the past. The African-American dance legends must be given credit for their contributions to modern American dance as we know it today. Gary agrees with Kirby about the strong influence African dance has had on concert dance and social dance forms in this country.

Randy Duncan realizes the importance of people understanding culture and its origins. "I also think it's important to cross cultures or to go from one to another without stepping on their toes. You might be calling a step West African dance, when in fact it's not. If you're going to say it's West African, then do West African."

Educational – Historical

The history of Black dance in America is the story of a cultural heritage and the crucial role African-American artists played in the development of modern dance as an American art form. The African-American experience had become a source for choreographers to celebrate life, make social comments, and ensure the survival of African-Americans in this society (Goler, 1995). Influenced by slavery, colonization, civil unrest, societal and political struggle, African-American choreographers had a story to tell.

> The cultural heritage of the American Negro is one of America's richest treasures...from his roots as a slave, the American Negro...sometimes sorrowing, sometimes jubilant, but always hopeful has touched, illuminated, and influenced the most remote preserves of this world civilization (Ailey, quoted in Moss, 2003, p.199).

Noted dance historian Iantha Tucker takes an historical approach in her teaching. Her mission is to give her students as much knowledge as she can about the influences of African Americans in dance and to honor these legends. Her choreography recreates the story of slavery and emancipation in *Genesis II.* While revealing the hardship of slavery and rigors of plantation living, Iantha focuses on freedom and hope for a better future in *Joshua Fought the Battle of Jericho* about statements and express joy.

Although her mission to relate the history of African Americans through slavery influences much of her choreography, Iantha is not limited to historical pieces. She admits that she is influenced by many things when creating a piece, one of them being the music she hears. In some instances, Iantha may create the dance in her head first, and then find the music to accompany it. She enjoys choreographing and feels that her choreography has not only grown but freedom and emancipation. She continues this theme in *Come on Children, Let's Sing,* which encourages African Americans to pursue their goals and dreams.

Iantha utilizes her choreography to tell stories, impart history, make matured through the years. One of the greatest feelings for Iantha is to see her work on stage. As far as the audience is concerned, she wants them to enjoy her work, and hopes to reach out to the audience with at least one piece that inspires them in some way.

Joan believes it is important to retain history through dance because there is

so much history that has been lost. As an educator, Joan strives to do just that through her choreography and teaching. This is important to her because as a young adult, Joan was unaware of the contributions of African-American dancers to the Civil Rights Movement. She realizes the value of informing students about the struggle the African-American dance legends endured and the importance of knowing their lineage in the dance world.

It was at the first International Association on Blacks in Dance Conference (IABD) in 1973 that Joan learned about the African-American pioneers in dance. She studied with Arthur Hall, Pearl Primus, and Katherine Dunham. Joan was very much influenced by the spirituality of dance legend Katherine Dunham. She embraces the word Sankofa, "retrieving the past and bringing it with you to where you are and going forward with some kind of meaning." Joan commented on the mistaken belief that African dance is a free-style form of dance, emphasizing that every movement and step has a particular meaning.

Germaul Barnes approaches teaching from an historical perspective, stressing the necessity for a component in dance education that teaches dance majors about the legends and their influence on modern dance. "I was shocked by going to these universities with masters and dance programs not knowing who the Donald McKayles are, not knowing the Eleo Pomares and if they are still alive and their influence."

Jawole Willa Jo Zollar believes that a history of the people at any given time is contained in the dances that they do. Dance is a physical history of a people and that the dances of each period, tells us something about the culture at that time. Jawole believes it is the artist's responsibility to ensure history, which she demonstrates in *Walking With Pearl (2004)*. Inspired by the seminal work of Primus, Jawole narrates from the journals Primus kept about her visits to Africa during the 1940s and 50s. The dancers reenact the roles of mother, daughter and student against a backdrop of images of the Black diaspora, of suffering and of survival.

Looking at the world through Jawole's eyes, we can learn the stories from the past as she brings history to life in her choreography. The retelling of a story is meaningful for African Americans as a way to "re-right" history by rewriting it from the perspective of that culture. One of the main themes in Jawole's *Bones and Ash: A Gilda Story*, is acquiring new knowledge through a rebirth. "Girl" is a runaway slave who is taken in as a surrogate daughter by "Gilda" and "Bird." They teach her to understand her past in order to reclaim it and envision the future.

Gary agrees that it is important to know your history so that you can learn from the past. "If you don't learn from the past, then you're bound to repeat it...If we don't hold onto those few traditions that we have, then we'll never find out who we are...We won't know who's been down there pushing us up." The African-

American pioneers in dance paved the way for the future of all African-American artists in modern dance.

The Danced Religions – The Spiritual Connection

The human body is the vehicle of expression in dance. Religious beliefs and attitudes toward the body may shape the way and the reasons people dance in different cultures. In African culture, dance plays a central role in worship. "The enforced diaspora of large numbers of Yoruba from West Africa (Nigeria) not only implanted a vigorous tradition of religious dance in the Caribbean and the Americas, but also changed the way the rest of the world dances" (Jonas, 1992, p.37).

When the Africans were brought to America as slaves, they were forced to give up their religious practices and beliefs to become Christians. Drumming had been banned, fiddle playing was frowned upon and dancing was discouraged by the Protestant Church in the South. However, because religious services remained segregated, the slaves were able to secretly carry on their practices. One of the dances that managed to survive its African roots was the *Ring Shout* (Emery, 1988).

Peter Fields spoke of the strong connection to religion in African culture, and how each movement represents something in African dance. According to Peter, dance has always been recognized as an important aspect of Black life and a central element in African-American religion. Peter states, "We danced our

services. Let's go back to Africa. Our services started with just a praise of movement." Peter's work is informed by a deep spirituality and belief that everything we do comes from God. As a dance educator, Peter wants his students to understand why they move. He maintains that the power of movement lies in the order of God's angels and that is the force behind his work. In *Changing Winds,* based on the angel Obeyah, "She sweeps through you and causes you to run." Peter believes the creative force that works through the artist comes from above. He explained that in African dance and sometimes in church, when a person begins to shout, those are the spirits at work.

Although Iantha relates historical events in her dances, her choreography is also spiritually based as evidenced in *Religious Suite*, inspired by the Negro spirituals and works songs: *Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child; A Long Way From Home; Go Down Moses, Let My People Go;* and *Swing Low Sweet Chariot, Comin' For to Carry Me Home.* The African-American experience is strongly connected to religious ties that go back in time to the days of slavery.

Dianne Maroney-Grigsby's work is very influenced by her experience while performing with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. She has recreated some of the company's works for her students at Grambling State University. Dianne begins with an idea and then determines what she will choreograph. She admits she is greatly inspired by the music, adding that the music often dictates what the

movements will be. Dianne studies her music so that when she listens to it, she can envision the steps.

The process she uses may vary for each piece, sometimes even taking a while for the concept to work itself out, but it is important that she really learns the music first. Sometimes, Dianne may start choreographing from the ending, or the middle, or the beginning. The process she uses to choreograph has changed through the years. When she was younger, Dianne would physically execute all of the movements, but now at the age of fifty-six, she more often visualizes the steps.

Dianne is inspired by gospel music and uses the sounds of Yolanda Adams in some of her pieces. *As Long as I Got Jesus* is one example of a dance with a religious theme. Some of her words include dances of a spiritual nature, while others may have a more theatrical flair. Pierre also draws from his experience in the Black church when choreographing a religious, gospel or praise dance. *Go Children Go,* is one example of a praise dance Pierre choreographed inspired by the exuberance of the Black church.

The Universal Language

The question of dance being the universal language is a topic of controversy among dance scholars. Dance represents human identity and a celebration of the human spirit. Dance is the artistic heart of kinship. It is a sacred universal remedy. The universality of dance lies its power to transcend the boundaries of politics,

culture, and ethnicity by bringing people together in peace and friendship (Ross, 2007). "Dance, like language, is found in all human societies. And like language, dance has power. The universality of dance is easily explained: the human body itself is the vehicle. All societies acknowledge its power" (Jonas, 1992, p.9). Randy Duncan is strong in his conviction that dance is the universal language. This belief is not unfounded. Randy's perspective comes from his personal involvement choreographing for professional dance companies around the world, including the international company *Bat Dor* from Tel Aviv, Israel. Director-founder, South African born Jeannette Ordman has commissioned the works of Randy and other internationally renown choreographers.

Pierre Lockett also believes that dance is the universal language because it can be understood in any language or culture. Pierre's view is based on his experience performing internationally in Russia, Paris, and Japan, while a member of The Dance Theatre of Harlem. When Pierre performed the gospel piece *Touch Me,* with the Joffrey Ballet, while in Israel, he believes they understood the message although their religion is completely different. The ability to cross cultures was also evident in the reception Pierre got when he performed *Light Rain. Light Rain,* which is about the sensuality between a man and a woman, thrilled the audience to a standing ovation. One does not have to be of a particular race or culture to understand the concept of love; it crosses all barriers.

Gary Abbott, associate director of Deeply Rooted Dance Theater, agrees that dance is the universal language because all cultures dance and have their style. He has experienced this firsthand, the company having performed internationally in Switzerland, Spain, and Calgary. Gary finds that when people hear music, they have to dance because there is something inside that makes this happen. He maintains that dance is a way humans use to communicate ideas and that all people dance.

Dance as Prescription

Dance as prescription examines the role of dance as a way to create awareness of social issues, and in some cases create change. The following artists in this study believe dance is an effective way to create social awareness: Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, Germaul Barnes, Charles Carter, and Gary Abbott. These individuals utilize their choreography to speak about social issues maintaining it is their obligation as African-American artists to express issues that affect the African-American community.

Raise Social Awareness – Create Change

"The American dancer does not just accept life, but takes it into his own hands and tries to shape it. He is not content with states of being but with states of action" (Martin, in Burt, 1998, p.136).

Jawole Willa Jo Zollar formed the modern dance company, Urban Bush Women in 1984, "to explore culture as a catalyst for social change, creative expression, and spiritual renewal" (Zollar, in Dixon Gotschild, 2003, p. 24). She believes that dance can create awareness in individuals and has the potential to create change in society. UBW grew from Jawole's desire to form a company of dancers who would work together to create dance works.

Dance has the power to raise awareness of social issues and the content and message in Jawole's dances is a valuable vehicle for expressing these issues. She uses her choreography to convey meaning and speak to the audience through movement. Jawole addresses spiritual, political, and cultural issues, and explores personal experiences of Black women in her choreography. Her choreography is a social commentary about issues that pervade our society. In *Life Dances I-III,* Jawole brings issues of morality, incest and abuse to the stage. *Womb Wars* (1992), is a comment on abortion. In *Lipstick,* she looks at the exploitation of female adolescents.

Jawole uses dance as a voice to express issues that plague our society. *Shelter* (1988), was created as a comment about the plight of people left homeless. The tragic events of September 11, 2001 brought new meaning to her piece when several members of her dance company were left stranded with only the clothes on their backs. The message is intended to remind us of how close we all are to being homeless, just a paycheck away.

Jawole believes dance can provoke awareness in individuals and has the possibility to create change in society because of its power to reach people in the way that words cannot. In her community dance pieces, she focuses on an issue that a community is facing. During a time of public outcry of discontent with our current government, Jawole expresses her concern for society and urges Americans to vote. In her latest works, *Are We a Democracy* and *Sojourn of Truth*, she reminds citizens that voting is not only a privilege and right, but a necessity.

Jawole is not the first African-American choreographer to explore movement as a possibility to create social change. Pearl Primus, a key figure in the Workers' Dance League choreographed dances as a reaction to the racial discrimination she experienced. *Strange Fruit* (1943) is an unsettling piece about the lynching of Black men in the South. Other works that increased her reputation as a political activist were *Slave Market*, about the inhumanity of slavery and *Hard times Blues*, about sharecropping. Primus introduced athleticism into dance with her five feet jumps into the air. It was said that her leaps were a form of social protest, a flight from anger (Creque-Harris, 1992).

Katherine Dunham was also a political activist fighting segregation, filing lawsuits, making public statements and even refusing to sign a contract with a Hollywood agency that practiced discrimination. In 1951, she premiered *Southland,* a piece about lynching. As Miss Dunham's assistant, Germaul Barnes was greatlyinfluenced by her work, teaching, and very presence. He recalled her

response to the question, "Was that a political statement?" asked by an audience member about *Southland.* "Well, the climate was where it was at the time it was created, and the story that came out of that..." Germaul was very much aware of the social and political tension that became the subject matter of the choreography at the time. The choreographers used dance as a vehicle to express what needed to be said.

Germaul has worked with many African-American choreographers who created provocative works addressing social issues. Eleo Pomare, Donald McKayle, Milton Myers, and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar are all choreographers who have created dance works with strong social themes. Germaul reflected on the idea of the responsibility of the artist being a social responsibility. Dance provides a platform for speaking out and creating awareness of issues. As a member of The Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company, Germaul had experience performing choreographic works that made political statements or dealt with sensitive issues.

Germaul wants to bring awareness to society through his choreography. He believes that in order to accomplish that, it is necessary to first understand who we

for speaking out and creating awareness of issues. As a member of The Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company, Germaul had experience performing choreographic works that made political statements or dealt with sensitive issues. Germaul wants to bring awareness to society through his choreography. He believes that in order to accomplish that, it is necessary to first understand who we

are. By eliminating the barriers that restrict us will enable us to pursue our goals. "How can I help eliminate these self-restrictions that we put on ourselves?" One of his more recent choreographic works, *Invisible Gates,* was the result of Germaul having to take a temporary break from been dancing. He had been dancing for fifteen years straight, going from one company to the next, when he suffered a knee injury. During his recuperation from knee surgery gave Germaul time to reflect on his own life.

As a professional choreographer and director for his company, Viewsic Expressions, Germaul's focus is on creating a dialogue between the audience and the choreographer. He feels it is the artist's social responsibility to have a dialogue about issues that are sensitive. *Sticks, Straw and Stone Project* is one example of Germaul's effort to have this type of dialogue. Dance provides a platform for speaking out and creating awareness.

Charles L. Carter prides himself on being an effective teacher using dance as a teaching tool to inform his students and the community. Artistic director of Bal Chi Dance Company, Charles created the company in 1998, out of a need for the minority students at Northern Illinois University to have a performing venue. It is not surprising that many of the themes in his choreography deal with problems that specifically concern African Americans. Charles not only creates awareness of these problems, but relates a message to the audience that they are responsible for

correcting these issues. "I want them to be aware of the problems but also I want them to be aware that they have to do something about it. We have to get it together."

His choreography deals with social issues that have impacted African Americans, such as AIDS, Black on Black crime, and the down-low. Another thing that has influenced his choreography is children. A former elementary school teacher, Charles is concerned with the idea that "Blacks can't speak English" and has created a piece called *A Brown's Blues* based on Brown versus the Board of Education.

Charles conducts a community dance program in which he travels to various cities to bring different cultural groups together to dance. His mission is to empower people through dance and make them aware they can accomplish their goals by working together. Charles shows them that through hard work and discipline, people can achieve their dreams, regardless of race, ethnicity, or culture.

Charles believes dance should be a healing art because of all of the problems we face in society and our lives. "I just see it with things like 911 and all of those types of things, we have to use dance as a healing art." Kirby Reed, Founder of Ascension/The Kirby Reed Project also believes that dance can help to heal society. "It's not what it should be. It should be healing."

The question of whether the artist has a social responsibility is an on-going

subject. Gary Abbott, Associate Artistic Director of Deeply Rooted Dance Theater is grounded in this mission. In a performance review, one dance critic described the company as "a fusion of the arts and social justice." Gary believes that what makes this company unique is because they are very aware of the human condition.

Gary feels it is the artist's responsibility to produce work that will impact the audience in some way and is inspired by everyday situations and people he has encountered. He is empowered by creating dances that address social issues and deliver a powerful message. Gary is assured that as an African-American artist, it is necessary to approach subjects that need to be talked about. "We feel that we say the things that we need to say. As an artist it is your responsibility to say that. Saying some of the things that get people thinking about it is your responsibility." Gary's inspiration for *Hand to Mouth* was a reaction to the devastation and loss of life in Indonesia after the tsunami. Because it appeared that the people affected were not getting the aid and support they needed, Gary felt empowered to make a statement about this in his choreography. The plight of the people left homeless in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina further intensified the message behind the piece. Gary believes that through dance one can open up a dialogue to create a conversation. He maintains that if one has been impacted by an experience, one's choreography can reflect that and provoke a discussion. *Hand to Mouth* leaves the audience wondering what would happen to them in a similar situation. The answer to that question followed shortly thereafter in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

Gary and Artistic Director, Kevin Iega Jeff, were inspired to create *Jagged Ledges* because of all of the people they know and have worked with who are living with HIV/AIDS. "*Jagged Ledges* is about the plight of people living with HIV/AIDS and the soul's quest for freedom." Their purpose is to empower with hope all of the people who are afflicted with this disease. Iega adds, "That while it is devastating, it's also a very hopeful place to live...because you find out so much more about your life, when you are confronted with your death." Art has always been one means for people to express their views and make social commentary. Utilizing dance to express social issues can create awareness and open a dialogue to problem solve. Gary believes dance plays a role in educating society.

Choreographers Kirby Reed, Joan Burroughs, Iantha Tucker, and Pierre Lockett agree on the role of dance to address social issues. Kirby believes that dance can bring awareness to society by opening up a subject and having a dialogue about it. He does not know how much change it can bring, but it can create a discussion. Joan Burroughs finds that dance is an effective means to express issues because sometimes that is the only way people are going to see them. She also thinks that dance is a good medium to overcome social issues. Iantha Tucker agrees that dance can be used to express social issues and says that we do it all the time without even realizing it. She believes that artists can use their artistic expression to protest or show feelings without it being held against them. Pierre believes that

it is necessary to make people aware of societal issues. The communities and cultures need to be informed about these issues and the medium of dance is one way to make that happen.

Summary

The reasons the participants in this study choreograph are descriptive, educative, and prescriptive in nature. These individuals use dance to tell stories, communicate, educate, raise awareness of social issues, and in some instances create change in society. In the category, Dance as Description, the subjects used their choreography to tell stories, express emotions, describe life experience, and to entertain. Randy, Kirby, Mel, and Pierre believe the choreographer should always tell a story or make a statement which can be understood by the audience. They agree dance should be inspiring and entertaining. The individuals in this study absorb all of life's experiences to inspire their choreography. Randy, Kirby, Pierre, and Joan use dance to express strong feelings and emotions including anger, betrayal, grief, and love. For these individuals, dance provides an emotional release, the intensity of their works emanating from their personal experiences.

The category, Dance as Educational Discourse included choreography to communicate, create a forum for discussion, and educate. While Joan Hamby-Burroughs, Iantha Tucker, Dianne Maroney-Grigsby, and Peter Fields may tell a story, they create choreography to educate about history, culture, religion, and life

experience. These artists believe dance is a means of communication that can provide a forum for discussion, and cross cultural barriers. Randy, Pierre, and Gary maintain dance is the universal language because it can be understood by all cultures regardless of language.

The category, Dance as Prescription included choreography that not only created awareness of social issues but looked to affect change in society. Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, Charles Carter, Gary Abbott, and Germaul Barnes create choreographic works to raise awareness of problems that affect society and in some instances act as a catalyst to incite change. These artists believe it is their responsibility to provoke awareness in the audience through dance.

How the Dance Experience Provides Meaning

How does the dance experience provide meaning for the African-American dancer, choreographer and dance educator? Through the medium of dance, the artist can express thoughts and feelings. The creative process can be a journey of discovery and exploration, one in which the individual gains new awareness of self, a time of reflection. Dance can provide a release for internalized or repressed emotions, it can be cathartic and healing. The creative act allows the artist to transcend boundaries by taking risks through art. The dance experience can be empowering, transforming, and even liberating. Dance is one vehicle that allows African-American choreographers to tell their story, create awareness in society and

become self-actualized. As adult educator and philosopher, Jack Mezirow stated, "There is no need more fundamentally human than the need to make meaning of our experiences" (Mezirow, 1990, p.11).

This section will look at the ways the dance experience has created meaning for the participants interviewed in this study. The data from the life histories revealed that dance was empowering, transforming, and liberating. Within these categories, the following subcategories emerged: emotional; spiritual; and physical. These categories are examined to answer the question, How does the dance experience provide meaning?

Empowering

The following individuals have become empowered through the dance experience and the choreographic act. Many of these artists share similar feelings of empowerment because they have had similar dance experiences. For others, the feelings are unique. The range of feelings experienced included: identity, purpose, voice, adrenaline rush, pride, strong values, important, grateful, satisfying, confident, and connected.

For some of the participants in this study, dance has empowered them by connecting them to their heritage. Going back to one's cultural roots provides a sense of identity. Strong feelings of identity are important for human beings to succeed in this world. Joan Burroughs and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar both are both

empowered through cultural identification. Gary Abbott is proud to learn from his past revealing the importance of maintaining those traditions. While Germaul Barnes feels responsible to preserve cultural traditions and continue the legacy in modern dance, he provides insight into his own ontological awareness. Mel Tomlinson echoes Germaul's thoughts on wanting to be known as a dancer, not a "Black" dancer. Randy Duncan's positive self-identity at an early age propelled him into a successful career in dance.

Identity

Cultural identification is important for all human beings. Knowing who we are and how we fit into this life world can determine the course we take. The social constructs we create and that are created for us can strengthen or destroy one's identity or feelings of self-worth. Throughout the course of history in the United States, African-American citizens have had to prove themselves and negotiate in a hegemonic society, cast in life's performance as the "other".

As a child, growing up outside Birmingham, Alabama in the 40s, Joan Hamby-Burroughs experienced discrimination and segregation all around her. She recalled peeking in Corky Bell's dance studio and watching the White children dance. It was not until Joan went to college and studied dance that she felt she really belonged. Joan believes dance can give a person another identity. "I didn't have the privilege and that's why for me, it's so important that people express those

things and talk about their lineage in the dance world, and who they were taught by."

Jawole Willa Jo Zollar's first experience taking dance at the age of six was with a Russian instructor who made insensitive comments in class about the African-American children (Dixon Gottschild, 2003a). At the age of seven, she began studying with Joseph Stevenson, a former student of Katherine Dunham, and continued with him until she was sixteen. With Joseph, Jawole did not have to think about "being the right body"; she was able to explore dance for feeling, rhythm, and style. This positive experience provided the cultural identification and self-esteem that would last a life time. Because Jawole developed a strong sense of self at such a young age, she was comfortable with her body and who she was. Having this positive sense of identity enabled Jawole to develop and express her own personal dance style and deal with the prejudice she would encounter as a young African-American female adult in the dance world. Jawole explored these issues of identity through her choreography in *Hair Stories* and *Batty Moves.*

Having a strong ontological awareness and sense of identity is important for all human beings, but it is especially important for dancers who are judged by how they look. Because of the stigma of body type, race, and gender that is pervasive in the dance profession, African-American dancers have had to struggle to be accepted in mainstream concert dance and prove competency in ballet.

Mel Tomlinson who was a principal dancer with the Dance Theatre of Harlem, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, and for New York City Ballet, is proof that African-American dancers can do ballet. Mel believes it was dance that helped him build self-esteem and create the person he is today. He is a proficient dancer and master of four languages. Mel describes himself as "a good dancer who happens to be Black" and that it is only in the United States that people create labels. Germaul Barnes echoes Mel's perspective on being described as a "Black" dancer. He never considered it a conscious choice to be a "Black" dancer. Germaul wants to be known as a dancer and as a person.

Pierre Lockett knows how it feels, as an African-American male, having to prove competency in ballet within a European-American dominant culture. As a member of the Dance Theatre of Harlem, Pierre recalled Arthur Mitchell's words, "'You're representing something bigger than yourself'...and that goal was to let people know that African Americans can do ballet." Arthur Mitchell set high standards for the company, requiring the dancers to behave professionally both on and off stage. Pierre commented, "People thought we were going to be this group of thugs from Harlem who were out to dance." Pierre believes that dance can educate society about the role of the Black dancer. "A person doing tombe, pas de bourre, glissade, grand jete can be of any race, any color as long as you execute the

movement clearly. It just shows that anybody can do this. It doesn't matter where you come from or what your background is."

Randy Duncan's first encounter with dance was a positive one being accepted for the Chicago all-city high school production of *West Side Story* when he was only twelve years old and in the eighth grade. Although Randy had never studied dance, he had prepared himself well by stretching everyday and copying the movements of the gymnasts and acrobats he saw on television. His hard work paid off and instilled in him self-confidence and discipline at a very young age. Randy proved he was up to the challenge and eager to be part of the multiethnic/cultural production, *West Side Story*.

Positive feelings of identity empowered the above individuals. This identification and self-awareness provided a foundation for them to build upon and use to become the successful professionals they are. Learning about one's culture can provide identification and awareness of one's origin and understanding of self (Cunningham, 1991; Hanna, 1997). Self-understanding is key to understanding how our own culture-bound assumptions about dance affect us (Chalmers, 1996). Understanding how socially constructed norms have been created can serve to deconstruct outmoded ways of thinking and being.

Connecting with the Past

Through art, we can learn much about the past. Joan believes it is especially important for African Americans to retain the rich culture and traditions because so much has already been taken away or lost. Many of the artists in this study are empowered by their past and feel honored to carry on the legacy of African Americans in dance.

Gary Abbott believes it is important to maintain the traditions of those who paved the way in dance. Pierre Lockett agrees on the importance of preserving the past through art. Germaul Barnes believes that we hold the power to be transcendent of our life experiences. Joan Burroughs feels we need to look back at the past in order to move forward. The African-American pioneers in dance paved the way so future generations did not have to endure the same struggles and fight the same battles. It is important to know the history of African-American dance, preserve it, and embrace it with respect.

Gary believes that tradition is a powerful form of identity and makes us aware that someone was here before us paving the way. He maintains that it is especially important for African Americans to hold onto those traditions because so much has already been taken away and lost. He is proud to follow in the footsteps of the giants in dance such as Ailey, McKayle, Dunham, and Primus.

Germaul agrees on the importance of preserving and continuing the legacy of the African-American dance legends. He believes it is important to understand

where modern dance has come from and where it is going. Germaul believes, "It's all that we hold. We have to power to be transcendent of whatever we do." Germaul is empowered to preserve the legacy of Africa Americans in modern dance.

Pierre considers it necessary to maintain cultural traditions through dance. It is empowering to be able to impact society by creating cultural awareness. "I think that these things are necessary to make the communities and cultures aware."

Joan knows the significance, especially for African Americans, of learning from the past in order to move forward. "San Kofa is meaningful to me...retrieving the past and bringing it with you to where you are, not leaving it back there to be rediscovered all over again." She realizes the importance of maintaining the legacy of African Americans in the dance world. "We are here because of those who came before us who would not die" (K. Welsh, BCDE lecture, 2007).

The concept of giving back is a common theme echoed in African-American culture. For Dianne Maroney-Grigsby and Gary Abbott, it is an empowering feeling to be able to give back as they have been given to. Dianne, a former member of the Ailey company was fortunate to receive training from the best. In addition to studying with and working for Alvin Ailey, himself, she studied with Sylvia Waters, Ulysses Dove, Talley Beatty, Donald McKayle, and Mel Tomlinson, to name a few. Dianne believes that it is her responsibility to share what she has learned with the next generation of dancers. As a dance professor at Grambling State University,

Dianne finds teaching to be a humbling experience. She is empowered by what she has received and wants to do the same for her students. "Because that's what we were told, to give back. That's the idea, to reach back and to give back...as so many people have given me.

Gary feels a sense of value in being able to reach out and touch so many people's lives through his choreography. He is proud to know that Deeply Rooted Dance Theater makes a difference in the lives of the people who come to see and appreciate their work. Creating dance that has the power to transcend our ordinary lives makes Gary feel valuable.

Values

Jawole explained that value is one marker present in African-American culture. African-Americans have suffered a history of injustices, but have managed to survive in spite of insurmountable odds. The values of hope, strength, virtue, and joy are all values embraced and displayed in the choreography created by African-American artists. "Ailey's "Revelations" is about hope, it's about reaching, it's about joy. Those are values...and I think strength is also a value, the virtuosity in holding the leg up...it's a value."

Jawole's feeling of empowerment as a child came from dancing for feeling and from her heart. When she studied dance in college, she found new ways to

empower herself. She had mastered the unknown territories of ballet and modern. "It was great, but it was a challenge, because trying to find the balance between that impulse I had had as a dancer doing this other kind of movement and now trying to focus on ballet and modern."

Kirby Reed exemplifies the virtue of maintaining a strong work ethic. He is empowered by the value of responsibility that carries over into his personal life, as well as on stage and in his teaching. Kirby is very business-minded because he believes you develop a reputation and it is his reputation that keeps him working. "How you behave working establishes your career. I take nothing for granted that I am able to work."

Discipline is one value Pierre prides himself in and is empowered by as a performer and as a teacher. He expects the same high standards from his students that he sets for himself. Dance has instilled in Pierre the discipline necessary to be successful in the dance world and in his life.

Mel does not believe he got where he is today without hard work. He describes it all as being a struggle and that his success had nothing to do with luck, and everything to do with being prepared. As an educator, Mel sets the example that anyone can achieve success through discipline and hard work.

Pride

Pride is a virtue that is embraced by several of the participants. Because African-Americans have come from a long history of continually having to prove themselves is reason enough to grasp this feeling of empowerment. Dance gave Mel Tomlinson and Pierre Lockett the ability to build self-esteem and pride through their superior level of performance.

Mel Tomlinson never dreamed that he would have a career in dance. He didn't begin formal training until he was seventeen when he moved to New York and joined Dance Theatre of Harlem. From there, he went on to dance with The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, and the New York City Ballet. Such a career afforded Mel opportunities he would never have otherwise experienced. Mel believes that it was dance that helped him build self-esteem and create the person he is today. He expressed that as an artist, he was responsible for maintaining the high standards that empowered him to gain confidence and integrity. "Before I knew it, there were other offers coming in from other Black companies. It started with Alvin Ailey and then I was responsible for holding down the title of principal dancer and being a star."

Pierre believes dance has created the person he is today. He attributes Dance Theatre of Harlem as playing a major factor in his development artistically, professionally, and personally. Arthur Mitchell set high standards for the company,

both on and off stage, which influenced Pierre to set the same standards for himself. Pierre developed self-esteem, pride, and confidence in himself, as a person and as a performer. Pierre described Dance Theatre of Harlem as a very family-oriented company, with everyone always looking out for each other and working toward the same goal. "And that goal was that to let people know that African Americans can do ballet!"

Pierre has been fortunate to have had many positive experiences throughout his dance career. Having trained and worked with some of the best companies in this country, empowered Pierre with pride for himself and his culture. "We were all working together primarily toward one goal, and that goal was to let people know that African Americans can do ballet." His experience with Arthur Mitchell and the Dance Theatre of Harlem set the tone for Pierre's future career in ballet. "Arthur Mitchell set a wonderful example and standard for what the company should represent. And he had a motto, which was, 'You're representing something bigger than yourself.'"

Pierre recalled the lasting impression choreographer Geoffrey Holder made on him while Pierre was dancing with Dance Theatre of Harlem. Geoffrey had choreographed the African wedding dance, *Dugala*. Pierre contends the piece was much more than the choreography, it was all about pride. What was so impressive for Pierre was the way Geoffrey empowered the dancers with pride and incredible confidence. Geoffrey's goal was to make sure that the company would feel excited,

confident, and most of all proud. "I think that what he gave to me, in particular and to the dancers who were in the Dance Theatre of Harlem, went so much farther than just dancing. He gave them a sense of self-worth, huge pride."

Important

All human beings want to feel important and valued. Because African Americans have not received credit for the many contributions they have made to American society, it is important they be recognized, not only in dance but in all aspects of life. The following choreographers related experiences in which they felt a sense of value and importance.

Iantha Tucker agrees that African Americans have not received due recognition for all of their contributions to American society. "Not many people will admit that we've influenced so much, and not just in dance, but in the arts, in building this country. We're so inbred in this society and in this country that folks don't even realize it.

Gary supports Iantha's view that African Americans have not gotten the recognition deserved, but adds that is has been a conscious choice by the dominant power structure not to acknowledge these contributions. "No, I don't think Black people ever get the recognition. I think we live in a world that chooses not to see people... that chooses what it wants to see and hear and support."

The surge of excitement or adrenaline rush before, during, or after a performance can be an exhilarating feeling. Pierre Lockett, Randy Duncan, and Mel Tomlinson have all felt the surge of an adrenaline rush while preparing for, during, or following a performance. Pierre recalled such feelings of anticipation prior to the performance at Dance Theatre of Harlem, with choreographer Geoffrey Holder. "He went to the edge of the stage and told the conductor to start the music and he did the dance right there on stage with us to get us pumped up for the performance."

Randy vividly recalled an emotionally empowering experience during one of his performances, while dancing with the Joseph Holmes Dance Company. Randy had choreographed *Turning Tides*, in 1985 as a tribute to his mentor, Joseph Holmes, who had died from AIDS complications. "I remember the curtains going up in the Auditorium Theatre...and there was this thunderous applause...before I even moved. It was like, oh, my God. People had seen it and they knew what was coming."

Mel's experience working with Arthur Mitchell and later for George Balanchine was completely empowering, leaving him fulfilled and feeling very important. While Mel was a dancer at Dance Theatre of Harlem, Arthur Mitchell passed the role of *Agon,* that he made famous, as a dancer with New York City Ballet, down to Mel. Years later, George Balanchine asked Mel to perform the role of *Agon,* at City Ballet when Peter Martins hurt his back and could not

dance the part. Mel earned performance of the year for bringing back the original role of *Agon,* in 1981. "They applauded and they gave me a curtain call...three times. Fifteen minutes they clapped. We couldn't go on to the next number. Thank God they filmed it. And it became mine, and other things became mine."

Grateful

The following choreographers are grateful and humbled by the dance opportunities they have experienced. They have worked with and been mentored by some of the finest dancers and choreographers in the field. The individuals in this study are appreciative of this fact and wish to continue the legacy of dance by sharing this knowledge with their students.

Mel has had a full career as a dancer, dance educator, and now as an ordained minister. He earned his doctorate in theology from the University of Carolina, School of Theology while in his sick bed after being stricken with the AIDS virus. It was 1987, and Mel had just left New York City Ballet to teach at his alma mater, the North Carolina School of the Arts. "Now that I've gone through my little road, I feel like I have something to share! So I speak now, I show people."

Iantha contends that she is empowered by seeing her choreography on the stage. To her, that is one of the greatest feelings. "One of the greatest feelings is to see your work on stage. It's very satisfying when you see the finished product."

The following choreographers are humbled by the dance experiences they have had. While this quality may not be unique to the African-American experience, I am touched by the deep display of humility in so many of the participants in this study. This is indeed, a rare attribute for people who have reached professional stature in the performing arts.

Kirby has choreographed for the Joel Hall Dance Theater, Gus Giordano Dance company, Cirque Rivera, and Dallas Black Dance Theater. In spite of his success, Kirby speaks of being empowered by having opportunities he would never had experienced outside of dance. "So, that brings a lot of opportunities. I never would have believed the things in my life that have happened. And I'm thankful and I want to be humble."

Germaul expressed deep appreciation in being able to work closely with Miss Katherine Dunham. She inspired in him the ability to become more than a great dancer, but an artist. He truly feels blessed to have been chosen to receive such a treasured gift. "I don't know why I was chosen...you know, for her to give me this gift."

Gary responded both modestly and proudly about how he feels when he watches his work on stage. He is appreciative for the gift he has been given as a choreographer. "It humbles me and gives me a lot of pride. It makes me appreciative, highly appreciative."

Connected-Close

Dancers develop a closeness and camaraderie with their fellow dancers and choreographers that people in normal occupations may never experience with their co-workers. The act of the dance in itself, requires close body contact and touching. Dancers must work together to accomplish feats of daring in a pas de deux or simply to perform uniformly as an ensemble. Pierre Lockett, Kirby Reed, Charles Carter, Joan Burroughs, Randy Duncan all have experienced those close connections.

Pierre explained how working at Dance Theatre of Harlem created a feeling of closeness between the dancers because they all shared a common goal. "The Dance Theatre of Harlem was a very family oriented company. Everybody watched out for each other and we all knew that we were all working primarily toward one goal."

Kirby also experienced a sense of family taking class with and dancing for Joel Hall. "No other place that I've been to has that kind of feel. Like you feel that's your family...I've never felt like those people there have not cared about me at any stage of my life."

Charles expressed that he enjoys the camaraderie he feels while dancing and the connection of dancing with other people. Dancing makes him happy. "I have always worked with a company rather than as a solo performer. So, I think you

develop a strong sense of camaraderie within the company."

Joan experienced a sense of belonging and acceptance when she dances. "It made me feel that I belonged. I'm accepted into other cultures because of that, because of the dancing I do with them."

Randy loved the atmosphere of being with all of the best dancers from all of the different high schools in the city. It was the first time he had the opportunity to bond with students from other cultural backgrounds. "This was the first time in my life that all of us were together, being among Hispanics and Whites and Asians."

Jawole formed her company Urban Bush Women out of the desire to unite female dancers with a common goal. "I had been thinking of a way to have an ensemble of people who would work together and create works out of a belief of something."

The dance experience provided more than a performing one for Mel; it enabled him to establish personal relationships and work with the best in the field. Mel was nurtured by Arthur Mitchell, Alvin Ailey, Agnes De Mille, and George Balanchine. Mel would take these positive experiences and apply them, years later, to his own pedagogical practice as a master teacher. "It's a wonderful thing, especially when someone takes time, like Agnes De Mille and Arthur Mitchell, and Alvin Ailey. It's amazing to have that relationship, not only with the company, but a very special relationship with Mr. B!"

Transforming

To dance was to become transformed. When engaged in the spirit of the dance, the slave could forget about his place in life by assuming an alternative identity than slave." To dance was to partake in a world apart of sensuous movement, rhythm, energy, power, beauty, and creativity. The emotional power of the dance experience cannot be denied. The slave could not, however, lose sight of his oppressor. Dance was also a means to defy the White man's control (Heckscher, 2000).

Dance making can provide a transformational experience for the choreographer, dancer, and the audience through the sharing of life stories, history, and social issues. Choreographing can contribute to a greater understanding of ourselves and of our world by allowing us to see how personal experiences have shaped our views and perspectives (Shapiro, 1998).

Spell-Bounding

Randy Duncan had no idea that dance would become such a powerful force in his life. As a child, he enjoyed watching the lavish movie musicals and the beautiful variety shows. He enjoyed the fantasy of escaping to a world of make

believe and magic. "I loved watching anything with magic, all of these things that you couldn't clearly touch outside of our realistic world."

Randy also was fascinated by the physical agility of the acrobats and contortionists on television. He would run home everyday from school for lunch just in time to watch *Bozo's Circus.* Randy's dreams would soon became a reality when auditioned for the all-city production of *West Side Story.* It was only a matter of time when he would meet Joseph Holmes. "Then I met Joseph Holmes... and I saw them doing this class in Graham Technique. I thought it was just spell bounding the way this group of dancers were moving."

Emotionally

Gary's world was also transformed when he became a dancer. As associate artistic director for Deeply Rooted Dance Theater, Gary's dreams come to life through his choreography. "The interesting thing about choreography is...It's how you take something that is in your brain and it's in your heart and in your soul, and to manifest it into something that is physical. It's like a physical dream."

When asked how he feels while dancing Pierre responded, that he feels very different for each role depending on what the role calls for. "I can't say that I feel happy or I feel elated or light or one with the universe. It's a very dramatic,

emotional....I feel emotional. And the emotion depends on the dance that I'm doing."

To prepare for a performance, Pierre would lapse into a zoning period, emptying himself of all feeling, of all emotion, of all preconceived concept of what the ballet was going to be. He emptied himself of everything so that he could become a receiving vessel. Whatever happened onstage was different every time. He executed the steps he was given, but he let go who he was allowing the movement to express himself now, as the dancer or performer. "There was always complete silence throughout the whole thing. It was this very eerie feeling and I just let it take me wherever it wanted to go. It was probably one of the most amazing experiences of my life."

Several of the participants find that dance has given them the chance to accomplish whatever they want. For some, this means achieving dreams and goals. For others, it is a means of discovering who they are or a way to become what they want to be. Joan feels that dance can is transforming because "It brings people another identity... Dance puts you in a whole different realm, not of defeat, but of possibilities."

Gary finds that dance has given him a sense of worth and made him feel valuable. It has allowed him to achieve more in this world than he could ever have dreamed. "Becoming what you say you want to be and more than what you say you

want to be. Discovering that you're actually bigger than you thought you were. That's what dance does for me."

Germaul believes that through dance, he can express his feelings. He uses his choreography to encourage others to break down the barriers that prevent individuals from accomplishing their dreams, "In the visible, or *Invisible Gates*, so if we can eliminate some of these restrictions, we can do whatever we like. We can accomplish anything we put our minds to and our bodies to and our spirits."

Pierre professes that dance has created the person that he is. "Dance Theatre of Harlem was a major factor in my development both artistically and professionally and it really set the standards by which I live my life today. As a member of the Dance Theatre of Harlem, Pierre was influenced by Arthur Mitchell and the standards he set, not only for himself, but for the company. "For me it goes much farther than dance. It just goes on to personal daily living and existence, and my life."

As an educator, Mel sets the example that anyone can achieve success in the dance world through discipline and hard work. "People have a lot of living, learning and loving to do. You'll make mistakes, we all make mistakes. Hopefully my dancers will say, yes, it's possible. If he can do it, I can do it."

Randy recalled how he felt about performing. "My days of dancing as a performer are over. When I was doing it, I was passionate about it. But those days are done for me." For Randy, dance is his life. "It is my life. Ask me if I ever

imagined doing anything else and I couldn't. I love teaching. I love choreographing. I really feel that God has given me a gift to be shared...and I'm using it."

Identity

When Pierre danced he assumed a new identity. He expressed that he would allow himself to become the character he was portraying on stage. "So, when the lights came up, I became Othello. What happened was, when I went onstage, I wasn't Pierre anymore." Pierre believes that life inspires art and he draws from his experiences during performance. "I just relied on emotion. How would you react if you were in love? How does it feel to confront somebody that you love? How does betrayal feel? How would you react to that? "

Gary also related becoming transformed into the character he is enacting, depending on the role. "I became completely immersed in the character. You just get very immersed in the character and you become that character for that moment in time."

Release

For Kirby, dance has provided him an emotional release. He believes that dance keeps him emotionally healthy and sane. "It's helped me to stay sane and it's

helped me to stay healthy. It helped me cause I'm an emotional artist, I guess, to deal with some tough times in my life...and as an outlet for those."

New Perspective

Jawole learns something different about herself with each new piece she choreographs. She finds this to be challenging and at the same time rewarding. "You're always in negotiation with yourself about doing the thing you love, yet it challenges you. With each piece, I think I learned something about myself and the creative process...in each piece I have a different challenge."

Gary was fortunate to have dance in his life to turn to as an alternative to choosing bad habits. He believes dance can change young people by giving them a new perspective about life. "I teach in different situations, all over the country and specifically in this little town, called Cheylette, Wyoming, where they have an enormous amount of problems." As a teacher, Gary inspires students by challenging them to achieve success. "I teach White kids African dance. When they attempt it and actually do it, you can watch them change, because it changes them instantly. Whether you want to do it or not, your view is changed."

Transformed Opportunities

All of the participants in this study have had countless opportunities to travel nationally or internationally because of their career. Whether performing onstage in

a foreign country or even in a different state in this country, dance has provided numerous experiences that would not have been afforded to them without dance. These individuals have been fortunate to study with and work for many of the legends and masters of dance.

Kirby recalled the opportunities dance has afforded him. "I've had a lot of opportunities to do things and to meet people I would have never met in my other life." Pierre admitted he would not have had the same experiences he has had without dance. "I got to travel a lot, see a lot of the world, meet new people. It was an incredible experience. It is not something I would have gotten had I stayed in Mobile, Alabama."

Germaul expressed gratitude for the opportunity to work with the African-American dance legends, the people who made such an impact on the world of dance. "I was able to work hands on with them and have a personal dialogue with these artists, people I have admired all my life. To actually do their work and see their philosophy and form relationships with them."

Spiritually

Several of the participants expressed they experienced a type of spiritual awareness while choreographing. Some described becoming a spiritual vessel for the work being created. Embedded in African culture is the belief that the artist is not the force behind the work, but "chosen" as a conduit for the stories that must be

told. This belief manifests a spirituality within the artwork, embodied in the epic memory sense. It is a calling upon one's ancestors to allow the artist the ability to create (Welsh Asante, 2001).

Randy feels a strong spiritual belief and connection that guides him to create. He believes that it is a spiritual guidance that is working through him when he choreographs. "I feel like it's something working in me. I honestly feel a strong spiritual belief and a connection, and that is what really moves me to do what I do. It's really a spiritual guidance."

Gary spoke of a heightened sense of spiritual awareness he experiences when performing. "It's like heightened spirituality, it's spiritual awareness, awareness of the spirit. There's more to it than just this, I feel like I'm actually an instrument or a spirit, or I'm observing my spirit or I'm experiencing it." Gary believes the connection is a spiritual one and maintains it is part of God's will to communicate and make that connection. "The human connection. You have to touch and you have to communicate. You have to feel other people. That's part of our spiritual and physical makeup."

Mel has deep spiritual connections and believes that he has found so many answers through movement. As an ordained minister, he finds that he aspires to a higher place through God. "It's that world where I meet God. It's that world where I find peace. It's that world where I find out who I am. It's that world I share, every now and then on stage, in my own way."

Kirby believes in letting life take its course. "The universe is creating a purpose for me to do something. I don't think it's done, yet. A lot of things that have happened are experiences, opportunities in my life I would never have thought would have happened."

Germaul's choreography is informed by a spirituality within himself and his connection to the world we live in. He grabs from what feeds him..."and to move to say something in your body and be honest and true to your own expression...and being aware of who you are and the environment that you live in." He is also inspired by the spirituality of Miss Katherine Dunham and how she has influenced and is continuing to influence him. "The spiritual and the presence, and the principles of what she has honed in as her style and technique."

Joan Burroughs was also very much influenced by the spirituality of dance legend Katherine Dunham. "I think she's just a very spiritual kind of person, she is very much in tune with the universe...watching a Dunham dance brings out a certain kind of energy and spirit in your body." Joan maintains that meaning was everything to Miss Dunham and that all of the steps she did had meaning.

Pierre spoke of experiencing a type of spiritual awareness every time he did the Ballet, *Touch Me*. He recalled memories of his brother, who had recently died from cancer, as his source of inspiration. "I took the words from the song, 'Touch me, why me, use me as a vessel to go out and spread your word.' So my brother was really my inspiration. I always thought of him when I did it."

Embodied Knowledge

The danced religions of the African diaspora contain the wisdom and intelligence that is termed embodied knowledge (Dixon Gottschild, 2003). Joan explained that sometimes in African dance, information starts coming to you that you were not aware of before, but it is there. "The dancing the Black people were doing was coming from somewhere, because of the roots in Africa for those dances. There's a connection and a continuity." This embodied knowledge is handed down from generation to generation through the spirit. "But that spirit is the thing, the spirit, the spirit that comes out. I guess that's the embodied knowledge that comes out in people's choreography."

Randy also referred to the concept of embodied knowledge. "I know it is (embodied knowledge)...these things just come...and they need to be shared...and there's visions that I have and it happens." He described the feelings he has experienced when engaged in the choreographic process.

> I feel like it's not me. I honestly feel it is something working in me. The images just keep coming. It's like you turn on a faucet and the water keeps going after you turn it on. I have an idea...and then the vision becomes clearer and clearer.

Liberating

> Dance has been my teacher, ever patiently revealing to me the dignity, beauty, and strength in the cultural heritage of my people as a vital part of the great other. Because through dance, I have experienced the wordless joy of freedom. I seek it more fully now for my people and for all people everywhere. (Primus, quoted in Creque-Harris, 1992, p. 156)

Dance was one thing enslaved Africans could bring with them to the New World (Jonas, 1992). The music, songs, and dance that retained African cultural heritage could not be destroyed by slavery (Holland, 2002). Dancing was a way of life – to dance was to be free. "The response to freedom was dancing, because the one who danced had always been, if only for a moment, free" (Heckscher, 2000, p.397). Dance provided a vehicle for helping African Americans preserve cultural traditions, maintain ethnic identity, become empowered, and experience freedom (Heckscher, 2000).

Dance, as an embodied, immediate art form, offers a way to for us to gain an understanding of self through artistic expression within a cultural context. The bodyas the instrument is the source of expression in dance. The body defines who we are. It is the site for critical reflection and the embodiment of all of our experiences. When we shed the traditional assumptions about dance (i.e. body type, race, gender), the dance experience can be liberating physically, emotionally, and spiritually (Shapiro, 1998).

Liberating Emotionally

The dance experience can be emotionally liberating. For the participants in this study, dance provides a way to release stress while having a career they love. It also provides the opportunity for them be open, honest and truthful in their expression.

Stress Release

Kirby describes himself as an emotional artist. For Kirby, dance has provided an outlet for emotions he didn't know how to deal with any other way. He attributes dance to keeping him sane during some tough times. Dance was also a means for Kirby to relieve stress. Dance was a life saver for Kirby, at a time when he did not know how to deal with his emotions in any other way. Through his choreography, Kirby was able to tap into his dark side and purge himself of the negative feelings he was experiencing.

> There was this time in my life I was suicidal. There were so many things that were going wrong, that I was so unhappy. I didn't know how to get it out. Being able to utilize that and be able to tap into that, is when I realized that I can choreograph.

Kirby realized that he prefers being behind the scenes than on stage. Although Kirby still enjoys dancing and rehearsing, he admits he does not like the

attention and pressure of performing. He enjoys choreographing because it makes him feel more at peace.

Truthful

With the body as the instrument of expression in dance, the dancer exposes himself/herself to the world. The dancer can only be what he/she is at that moment, and that is what the audience sees. It takes a special kind of person to be able to open ones self completely. It requires bringing a truthfulness and honesty to the work.

Germaul explains that being truthful requires knowing onself and the world in which one lives. "Being honest and true to your expression and to move to say something in your body. Being aware of who you are and the environment that you live in...helps a lot."

Gary believes that achieving a level of honesty necessitates not only discipline but also the desire to do so. He believes that reaching that level of truth and honesty is an elevated process. Gary maintains that dance is the most honest and courageous thing a person can do because one can only be what one is in that very moment. It takes intelligence, fearlessness, and strength to be able to walk out on a stage and put everything out there. He believes that it is the ultimate way to find out who one is and what one is made of. "I think dance is probably the most

honest thing you can do...it brings all of that fearlessness, responsibility, intelligence, all of that stuff, you just have to be that in order to stand onstage."

When Gary was performing, it made him feel free. He loved performing and appreciates that now, as a choreographer, he still has a career he enjoys. That puts everything in perspective for him. Gary is able to have a career that he loves, "I think about how I don't have to go out and do something that I don't want to...That's what dance has given me, it has freed me."

Liberating Physically

The physical activity of dancing can make a person feel liberated and free. For some of the participants in this study, it is the ability of being able to accomplish ordinary tasks with a creative flair. Dance allows individuals the opportunity to move about freely, because one must be free to move. The art form of dance requires physical contact and touching other people. This makes it imperative for the dancer to release inhibitions about ones body.

Charles testifies to the above statement but adds that there is a physical energy that is apparent between dancers as well. Unless the dancer is performing a solo, he/she must rely on the other dancers during a rehearsal or performance. Working as a corps requires learning to work cooperatively together, in executing the same moves at the same time when called for. Charles describes the dancer as one who lives the art and communicates with his/her body on and off stage.

For some of the participants, the physical experience of dancing is simply fun and makes them feel good. These individuals are in touch with their bodies and just enjoy moving. Randy has always had a keen sense and awareness of his body. When only in the seventh grade, Randy had already mastered the acrobatic skills of the backbend and splits. He not only possessed grace but knew how to lengthen his body as well. "I had a really good sense of my body, and not only that, there was a certain grace that the choreographers saw that I had, cause I wanted to lengthen everything."

Kirby enjoys dancing and doesn't even feel like it is work, "I enjoy what I'm doing. I don't think of it as a job because I enjoy doing what I'm doing." Iantha likes to dance because, "It's so much fun to dance, it feels good." Charles admits that he likes to sweat and that dancing makes him happy. "I feel joy. I like the physicality of it. I like the sweat. It just makes me feel good." Jawole simply loves movement. "It's just enjoying motion. Enjoying a move, enjoying motion. I like...I like movement. So I love movement."

Summary

For the participants in this study, dance is not just a career; it is a way of life. Dance has empowered, transformed, and liberated these individuals while performing, choreographing or teaching. Many of these artists share similar feelings of empowerment because they have had similar dance experiences.

Feelings of empowerment come from having a strong sense of self, cultural identification, and being able to make those strong connections with the past. For some of the participants, this has meant having to overcome obstacles, negative stereotypes and discrimination. Joan and Jawole experienced discrimination at an early age but were able to develop strong identities through dance.

Mel and Germaul both articulated they wanted to be known as a good dancer and person, not as a Black dancer. Pierre related his experience with Dance Theatre of Harlem and having to prove African Americans could do ballet. Although Randy had already developed strong self-esteem at a young age, his success as a dancer did not come about without preparation and determination. Mel, Germaul, and Pierre expressed that it was not luck, but through hard work and discipline, they achieved success in the dance world. Kirby echoed the importance of having a strong work ethic and taking nothing for granted. These artists are proud to have successful careers in dance. Dance has been the answer for them to gain self-esteem, pride, and a sense of value and importance they may have not experienced outside the dance world. Dianne and Mel are happy to be able to share their talent and experience in dance. Gary feels grateful that he can inspire others through his choreography.

Because dancers work so closely with each other, they often experience a camaraderie that people in other occupations may never experience with their

co-workers. The act of dance, in itself, requires close bodily contact and touching as dancers work together to accomplish feats of daring. They must have discipline, work cooperatively together as an ensemble, and develop trust in their partners. The participants in this study have not only worked with some of the most renown choreographers in dance, but have developed meaningful and lasting relationships with their mentors and fellow dancers.

Joan described feelings of belonging and acceptance by other cultures because of dance. Pierre recalled Dance Theatre of Harlem being like a family. Kirby described the Joel Hall Dance Center as a family and Joel as a father figure. Gary admired Donald McKayle for his ability to have both a professional dance career and a family. Jawole formed her dance company out of a desire to have a group of dancers who would work together with the same goals. The above dancers have all experienced feelings of closeness and family through the dance experience.

Many of the dancers in this study have been transformed emotionally, spiritually, and physically. For Randy, dance took him outside of the realistic world, while Joan described dance as offering a world of possibilities. Gary compared the creative act to a physical dream and feeling like a proud parent watching his/her child or creation. Germaul spoke of using dance to break down the barriers humans create in order to accomplish goals. Gary related becoming self-actualized through dance and realizing just how valuable you are. Pierre attributes dance to creating the person he is today. For Randy, dance is his life.

Dance has provided transforming opportunities while assuming a different identity performing onstage. Pierre and Gary described becoming immersed in the character they were portraying. These artists have also indicated having a deep spiritual connection. Mel feels a spiritual connection to God through dance. For others, it has been a spiritual transformation and guidance by a force or higher power. Randy and Gary spoke of a spiritual guidance or force that guides them in the creative act, while Pierre spoke of becoming a spiritual vessel. Kirby believes that he has been put on this earth for a purpose and that his work is not finished. Joan and Germaul both spoke of a spiritual presence. Randy and Joan referred to their way of knowing the world as embodied knowledge. Research on Alvin Ailey and Bill T. Jones supports the calling upon "blood memories" as a force in their creative masterpieces (Dixon Gottschild, 2003a). One can only believe that it is because of this strong connection to God that the African-American has been able to survive despite a history of slavery, discrimination, and injustice.

The dance experience can be liberating both emotionally and physically. Many of these individuals have traveled the world and experienced a life they would have never known outside of dance. For Kirby, dance is a way to relieve stress. He describes the experience as an emotional release or cleansing of the spirit through the choreographic act. Germaul believes that dance is a truthful kind of expression. Gary finds that dance is the most honest thing you can do. For others, it just makes them feels good to move when dancing. Randy has always had a keen awareness of

his body and how to lengthen everything. Jawole loves movement and motion. Charles fancies that dancers use their bodies to communicate even when not performing. For Iantha, dance is so much fun!

Dance has provided feelings of empowerment, transformation, and liberation for the artists in this study. The findings support the literature on the important role dance has played for African-Americans throughout history, from slavery to the present. From the Ring Shout to the Cakewalk, from the concert stage to the streets, dance has been used for entertainment, celebration, ceremony, and ritual. Dance has been a way to make social statements and to express the lived experience. Dance has not only helped to define history, but has been a catalyst to change conditions in society.

CHAPTER 8

THE PERCEPTIONS OF "BLACK DANCE"

Introduction

The question, "What is Black Dance?" or should the term "Black Dance" even exist has been the subject of controversy among dancers, scholars, and critics for years. Previous research on this topic has met with mixed reviews and remains to be answered. What appears to have been agreed upon is that an African-American cultural aesthetic is present in the choreographic works of many African-American artists (DeFrantz, 2002; Dixon Gottschild, 2003a; Malone, 1996; Perpener, 2001; Welsh Asante, 2001).

While I do not claim to make any attempt to have the knowledge or privilege to answer this unresolved issue, my data will provide additional insight into the complexity of resolving such a topic. This chapter is an attempt to analyze the research question, "What are their (the participants in this study) perceptions of the meaning of Black Dance?" I have presented documentation from dance scholars on their perceptions of the use of the term "Black Dance," in addition to the insight provided from the perspectives of the participants in this study.

Does It Exist?

The final research question, "What are their perceptions of the meaning of Black dance?" raised eyebrows and concern as the participants, in this study paused to reflect on the meaning and implications of the question. To categorize "Black Dance" as a separate entity implies that there is another form of dance to which "Black Dance" must be compared, and that would be "White Dance" (Dixon Gottschild, 2003a). If we agree that there is a "Black dance" then the questions arise as to who can create it, who can perform it, and who can write about it (DeFrantz, 2002).

Dance scholar DeFrantz raises the following questions in *Dancing many drums: Excavations in African-American dance.* "Why call it Black dance? Is this term only used in the United States to segregate? What is Black dance? Dance created by Black people? Why not speak of dance with an African American aesthetic?" (DeFrantz, 2002, p. 4).

DeFrantz (2002) questions why the apparent necessity for labeling differences is so prevalent in our society? Are other cultural forms of dance held to the same European-American criteria of judging the aesthetic value of the dance? To accurately study any dance, it must be placed within a socio-cultural context, in addition to analyzing the dance for structural components and composition (Adshead, 1988).

DeFrantz (2002) maintains that the term "Black Dance" was an expression created by White critics for dance performance they were unable to approach. Is it

even necessary to make a distinction between Black and White forms of dance? The practice of distinguishing "Black dance" from the "White dance" that European-American modern dancers were doing, might have arisen from the fact that dating as far back as the 1920's, African-American dancers were excluded from mainstream modern dance companies. Minstrelsy, vaudeville, and the Black musical had become accepted forms for black entertainers, but now African-American dancers had to justify their place in modern concert dance. Helmsley Winfield, one of the leading figures of the Harlem Renaissance formed the Negro Art Theater Dance Group to provide African-American dancers with improved technical dance training and in 1931, presented *The First Negro Dance Recital* in America.

Two years later, the Workers Dance League, a consortium of Black and White dancers gathered to address the question, "What shall the Negro dance about?" Yet, the question, "What shall the White dancer, dance about?" has never been asked. Winfield replied, "The Negro has primitive African material he should never lose. The Negro has his work songs of the South which he alone can express. It is hard for me to say what the Negro should dance about. What has anybody to dance about?" Dancer Add Bates responded, "A young Negro should dance about the things that are vital to him. There should be a militant direction. There should be some fights." A young unidentified girl also responded, "We have come to a newer type of dance, a dance that has social significance. Since we recognized the Negro as an exploited race, our dance should express the strivings of the new Negro.

race, our dance should express the strivings of the new Negro. It should express our struggle for social, economic, and political equality and our part in the struggle against war" (Manning, 2004, p. 58).

Black Pride

The 1960s brought a whole new awareness to the choreography of African-American artists as dance critics began to take notice. In an effort by White writers to acknowledge distinctions between the modern concert dance they were accustomed to and this unfamiliar terrain created the labeled, "Black dance." While many academics disapproved of the terminology as being separatist, some African-American musicians and artists regarded it as a signature of cultural pride (Dixon Gottschild, 2003a). If we throw all of the ethnic cultures into one big melting pot called North American art, then do we risk losing the rich history of African-American, Asian, Latino, and Native-American culture? Why must these cultures assimilate in order to meet European-American standards?

Decades later, when the International Association of Black Dance America (IABD) convened in New York City in 1983, the question posed was "What is Black dance?" Bill T. Jones replied, "Black dance can be about anything" (Lacy, 2000). Jawole Willa Jo Zollar describes Black dance as "a rainbow... Black dance is everything we are...all shapes, all sizes" (Dixon Gottschild, 2003a, p. 91).

"Black Dance" is a term that raises questions and problems that cannot be answered. Thus far, dance scholars have not been able to reach agreement on whether the term should be used, or if there is even a distinct form of dance that is "Black Dance." Dance historian Long alleges that "Black Dance" is not simply Black dancers dancing. The term "Black Dance" must reflect social and cultural aspects.

Distinguished dance critics Allen and Dixon-Stowell have written about this very topic in, *The Black Tradition in American Modern Dance* (Long, 1989). Allen asks, "Does Black dance really exist? And if in fact it does, just who is qualified to define it? I think it is presumptuous for any one person – black or white – to presume to define 'Black dance.' Since its existence was declared, far too many critics have taken the term and its murky definition for granted." Dixon-Stowell says, "I do not believe that Alvin Ailey and Arthur Mitchell conceived of their choreography as Black dance. Black influences are one of the many influences in their works" (Long, 1989, p. 7).

Dixon Gottschild (2003a) raises serious questions on the subject of Black dance.

> Here we are, living in the twenty-first century, talking about black dance and black dancers! What are we really talking about? A prejudice? A stereotype? An ideal? A limitation? And if I speak of black dance and a black dancing body, then is there also a white dancing body, an Asian dancing body, and so on? How and what differentiates these separate bodies? Who has the final word on what it is they do? Who is studying them? Where? And to what end? ...If we let go of the concept of race, then where would we hang our racism? In the end race, like gender is about

> power and where we are positioned in the hierarchy of a racialized society... And in the end, there is no "black race" or "white race," "black dance or "white dance." (2003a, p. 6)

How then, do the participants in this study view the term, "Black Dance?" Most of the artists responded that the choreography created by African-American artists does indeed, have an African-American aesthetic. Some felt that it was necessary and important to view "Black Dance" as a separate category. Others simply did not believe that "Black Dance" exists. Regardless of their stance, all of the participants cited important influences and contributions to the field of "Black Dance."

Equal not Separate

By looking at ourselves, we can better understand our own forms of dance and gain a deeper understanding of self-knowledge. The path to self-understanding includes learning about our own culture-bound assumptions about dance (Chalmers, 1996).

Kirby Reed grew up on the south side of Chicago and attended Calumet High School and Chicago State University. His primary dance training was with Joel Hall, who promoted cultural awareness through his dance classes and company. When asked if there was a separate form of dance called "Black Dance," Kirby responded that there is a cultural dance that is labeled "Black." As a member of the

Joel Hall Dance Company, Kirby was aware of Joel's concern for creating a multi-cultural dance company and school. Kirby founded Ascension, because of the desire to create a multi-cultural dance company of his own.

> I would love to have a multicultural, multiethnic, multi weight company. I like the textures of different colors and different body types. It's amazing that there are a lot of big-boned or heavy women or guys that actually can dance. And they're not given the opportunity because of their weight. It's not so much the external package as the passion, because it is a passion when you dance. It's the passion that connects you to the art.

Dianne Maroney-Grigsby, former member of the Ailey Company, recalled Ailey's mission to train his dancers to be well-rounded in all styles of dance, not just one form. Alvin Ailey formed his company to provide performing opportunities during a time when it was difficult for African-American dancers to find work on the concert stage. When Ailey created his internationally renown dance company that consisted of ethnically and racially diverse dancers, he made a statement to the world.

Randy Duncan, who grew up in the city of Chicago, was exposed to the diversity of races and ethnicities typical in a large city. The experience he had as a child, dancing for the all-city musical productions with other children from a variety of schools, instilled in him a respect for all cultures. While in high school, Randy was fortunate to study Dunham and Graham techniques with Joseph Holmes, his mentor and ballet with Harriet Ross, whom Randy described as a prodigy of dance.

Joseph asked Randy to join the Joseph Holmes Dance Theatre, in 1974, when he was just building the company. Joseph's dream was to create a company of mixed races who had a passion for movement.

Randy's appreciation for diverse cultures and types of dance has influenced his own unique style. He creates choreography that combines many styles, forms, and flavors of dance. Because dance is infused with so many cultures and ethnicities, this allows the choreographer to create works that are an embodiment of many types of dance. Randy's choreography is a combination of ballet, modern, and individual created dance forms. When asked if he believed there is a separate form of dance called Black dance he responded,

> We know dance started in Africa, and then it moved to Europe and America. Which is why I jive it all together, in my choreography. Mine is the integration of jazz, modern, ballet, and African dance. And it's those combinations which make the Randy Duncan choreography. If you look at past choreography that you've seen, you're going to feel a mixture of those things going on there. There are a few hip-hop steps, but certain hip-hop steps come from African dance, you know.

Cultural Identification

To comprehend the term Black dance requires looking at its roots, namely African culture. The influence of African and West Indian culture on the choreography of African-American artists helped in retaining the ethnic style and traditions of the motherland.

Although Jawole does not agree that there is a "Black Dance" anymore than there is a "White Dance," she is in accord on the primacy of having a cultural identification in dance. That her mother was a dancer may have been the deciding factor in enrolling Jawole in ballet class. Jawole's first exposure to dance school was at the Conservatory of Music in Kansas City, where she studied ballet with a Russian teacher, who used innuendos that Jawole internalized as being called "little monkeys" (Dixon Gottschild, 2003a, p. 93).

Jawole was fortunate to study dance for the next eleven years with Joseph Stevenson, a student of Katherine Dunham. "That's where I started dancing. That's where I got the cultural identification in dance, starting with dancing within my community. So, I feel that's where I got grounded in my dance."

Jawole explained that this was not ballet or modern, but rather, dancing for feeling. Here she learned traditional jazz (the real thing). "It was not ballet or modern, so that was good, because what it emphasized was dancing for feeling, and rhythm and style. And I didn't think anything about my body, about being the right body....If you were a big fat woman, you did the big fat woman dance" (Dixon Gottschild, 2003a, p. 93).

Baba Chuck Davis, Artistic Director of the African American Dance Ensemble and Dance Africa, talks about the inconsequence of body type and size in African dance. A large man himself, boasting seven feet, he tall affirms that in

traditional African dance forms, movement is an interpretation of the rhythmic melodies of the drums. The dancers do not ask themselves if they are the right body type. The person who can dance, dances (Dixon Gottschild, 2003a).

Embodied Knowledge

> Sankofa - We have to know the past, to know the present, in order to foresee the future. (www.sankofa.org)

Learning about one's own culture usually provides a sense of identity, roots, and self-understanding (Cunningham, 1991; Hanna, 1997). Joan Burroughs believes those connections are necessary because so much history has been lost. Sankofa is a term from Ghana, West Africa (from the Akan language) which means to reclaim the past. Joan explained that when people take African dance class, information starts coming to them that they did not even know they had. It's the embodied knowledge within.

> A lot of times people start taking African dance...and information starts coming to you that you didn't even know you had it. But it's in there. So the dancing that the Black people were doing was coming from somewhere, because of the roots in Africa for those dances. There's a connection and a continuity. But that spirit is the thing, the spirit, the spirit that comes out. I guess that's the embodied knowledge that comes out in people's choreography.

Making strong connections with the past is not uncommon in the choreographic works of the participants in this study and other professional African-American choreographers. Choreographer Ron K. Brown refers to the necessity for African-Americans to make those connections with the past. Many of his pieces are montages possessing dominant themes of spirituality and African-American heritage. *Grace,* 1999 is a journey of emotion, spirituality, and religious ritual. *Incidents,* 1999 is a socially compelling work inspired by Black women's memories of slavery (Lacy, 2000). Brown comments,

> As an African American, you're constantly trying to define yourself, to connect to something deep and ancient. You don't know where you began. So for me as an artist, traditional African dance is something I have to consciously reach back for, a hunt for grounding. But from the first, I'm trained here as a modern dancer. I understand that aesthetic. (Smith, 2005, Sect. 5, p. 1)

Jawole finds that dances are a physical history of the people and a way to learn about the culture of a people during a certain period. Her own choreography has been described as containing African-American history, cultural influences of the African diaspora, and women's experiences. Jawole states, "A history of the people at any given time, is contained in the dances they do. So, the dances of the twenties, the thirties tells us something about the culture of that time."

Kirby Reed maintains that because our society changes so much, it is important to preserve culture. Through dance, we can see the past, present and look

toward the future. The hip-hop culture has borrowed many movements rooted in African dance: pelvic movements, body isolations and intricate footwork. In Baba Chuck Davis's production of *Dance Africa,* one can see how the traditional African dance forms of Muntu Dance Company are reflected in the contemporary dance styles of Rennie Harris. Kirby noted, "And it all made sense...You'd see modern...Dance is so incestuous that it all pulls from something."

The African-American Aesthetic

African derived dance forms do share an African cultural aesthetic. These Africanist elements are what distinguishes African-American dance from European-American dance styles. Dixon Gottschild (1996) lists the following "Africanist" elements that have influenced American modern dance: paired opposites, polycentrism/polyrhythm, high-affect juxtaposition, ephebism, and the aesthetic of the cool. She defines "Africanist" as the "African and African-American resonance and presence, trends and phenomena; the African influence, past and present, and those forms that arose as products of the African diaspora, including traditions and genres such as blues, jazz, rhythm and blues, and hip hop...The pervasive African-rooted presence in everyday American lifestyles called, 'Africanisms,' are handed

down by culture and embodied within the individual" (Dixon Gottschild, 1996, p. xiv).

While the following participants do not believe that "Black Dance" is a separate form of dance, they do agree that there is a Black aesthetic or African-American aesthetic in the dances that Black people do. The participants in this study indicated that an African-American aesthetic is present in the choreography of many African-American artists.

Iantha Tucker believes that our society is saturated with African influences. In dance, she refers to a Black aesthetic that comes through in the style of the movement. The contraction-release and pelvic movements are not found in European dance forms. Although she finds it hard to define, she maintains that you know it when you see it.

> That's a good question. And we all question what that's about. Black dance, Blacks in dance. Again, going back to the very different styles of dance that are being performed, depending on the people who are performing, you may see more or less of the African movement style in what they're doing.

> It may depend on somebody's training, who they've trained with. But I think there is and I'm not sure how to express it. But there is an African style and influence, the use of the body contractions, release, the pelvic movements...there are just so many things that are enculturated in society that have African influence. Those who may have the Black aesthetic, others may not. It's very hard to put into words, but you know it when you see it. You know it when you feel it. That element comes through...the African style...the Black aesthetic.

> Not every Black person can dance. Not every African American has rhythm...as a natural thing.

Joan Burroughs also commented on the difficulty in defining "Black Dance." While it may not be easily defined, there is no denying its presence. The African aesthetic is very strong and readily seen in the work of many African-American choreographers.

> The flavor and those elements and things I can't even define...Although people have...It's in the posture, it's this or that. It gives you a reference or frame to work with. But that spirit is the thing, the spirit, the spirit that comes out. I guess that's the embodied knowledge that comes out in people's choreography. And then they stylize it...but you know, you see it.

Germaul Barnes agrees that there is a certain aesthetic apparent in the dances created by African-American choreographers. His perspective emanates from a wealth of experience having choreographed for numerous dance companies nationally and internationally. An artist can only create from what he/she knows or has experienced. Life experience will influence the choreographer's work, regardless of race or ethnicity. Does this mean that we should separate "Black Dance" from "White Dance"?

> I believe there is an African-American aesthetic and sensibility to dance...how do we isolate Black dance? But there is a definite sensibility because you are what you create. You create who you are and with the information that you have grown up with. So is there a Black dance? I

> don't know that answer. I feel that there is a clear feeling you get with African-American choreographers. But I've never, uh, considered it a very conscious choice to be a Black dancer. You know that story. I want to be known as a dancer, as a person.

Mel Tomlinson also expressed wanting to be known for his talent as a dancer and a person. He has achieved critical acclaim for performing as a soloist with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Dance Theatre of Harlem, and New York City Ballet. He does not want to be recognized as a Black dancer but a good dancer.

> I'm dark-skinned for those who may be listening to what you're writing, dark- skinned. And being a Black person, how they separate you, being light-skinned, dark-skinned, passing. I can't pass. I am Black, and I had to equate that with what I thought I was supposed to do. I just happen to be Black. I'm not a Black dancer, I'm a good dancer, who happens to be Black. I don't sound like a Black dancer, this is the way Mel sounds. I speak four different languages. I go to different countries and I'm quite at home, in Europe, no problem. Only in the United States, do you come up with labels.

Jawole Willa Jo Zollar does not believe that there is an exclusive genre labeled "Black Dance." Jawole elaborates on this question by referring to "a black dance aesthetic shaped by black culture" (Dixon Gottschild, 2003a, p. 98).

> No, no I don't. I feel that there are certain markers of Africa-American culture that you find are often in the dances that African-American choreographers do...the poly-rhythms, the style...it's not one thing. Anymore than White dance is one thing. You have all the way from someone like Bebe Miller whose influences are postmodern.

These influences may include the music listened to, television programs viewed, exposure to theatre and the arts, family values, and religious beliefs, all which shape an individual and the artists' choices. All of these influences contribute to a rich and exciting piece of artwork. For that reason, it is important for Jawole to "fill her palette" so that she has a wide range of experiences from which to draw for her choreography.

She spoke of value as being a marker in African-American choreography. African-Americans have suffered a history of injustices, but have managed to survive in spite of insurmountable odds. The values of hope, strength, virtue, and joy are all values embraced by African Americans.

> Well, I think what you see in African American culture, there's certain values...hope is a value, and I think it comes from the experience of being enslaved. Hope is a value so that's often in the dances of African Americans. You know, Ailey's "Revelations" is about hope, it's about reaching, it's about joy. Those are values...and I think strength is also a value, the virtuosity in holding the leg up...it's a value.

Welsh Asante (2001) identifies seven senses shared in an African aesthetic: polyrhythm, polycentrism, curvilinear, dimensionality, repetition, holistic, and epic memory. The multiple rhythms combined with multiple body parts moving simultaneously, repetition of movements, along with a circular quality contribute to the African aesthetic. Jawole echoed the commonality of the use of polyrhythms by African-American choreographers, but added that it's not just one thing that defines the African-American aesthetic in dance.

Capturing the Spirit

Many dance scholars and choreographers agree there are certain qualities behind the movement that is apparent in Black dancers. Black dancers take risks with their movements, they are not afraid to fall. An African cultural value is to "go for broke" while Europeanist culture values control (Dixon Gottschild, 2003a). Gus Solomons explained the difference between White ballet-trained and Black ballet-trained dancers this way. White ballet-trained dancers are taught to make their movements appear effortless, placing the leg in the air, as though unconnected from the hip. The Black ballerina will execute the same movement adding force and power while maintaining a strong connection to the body (Dixon Gottschild, 2003a).

This strong awareness of and connection to the body may emanate from the need to maintain connections to African culture and traditions. Perhaps this awareness stems from the necessity to take back and keep those traditions that were taken away. Dance critic Joan Acocella commented in her review of Dance Theatre of Harlem that "they danced like their lives depended on it" (Dixon Gottschild, 2003a, p. 31). One cannot deny the intensity of the African-American dance experience.

The sense of dimensionality is the ingredient that brings the extra flavor to dance created by and/or performed by primarily African-American artists. One cannot deny these dances have a unique and exciting quality about them.

Welsh Asante (2001) refers to this as a three-dimensional essence. The audience does not merely view the dance, but partakes in the encounter being transported to another dimension. This is the feeling I have experienced when watching a dance choreographed and performed by a primarily African-American dance company, such as the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Dallas Black Dance Theater, or Deeply Rooted Dance Theater. The energy of the dancers transcends the boundaries of the proscenium stage. DeFrantz makes reference to British cultural theorist, Gilroy's naming of the "Black Atlantic" to describe Africans in diaspora. He notes that it is the 'Black Atlantic' gesture in concert dance that allows the dancers to seemingly transcend the proscenium stage forcing the audience to engage in the experience (DeFrantz, in Fischer-Hornung & Goeller, 2001).

In her chapter, "Blood memories, spirit dances," Dixon Gottschild (2003a) illuminates the essence or African-American spirit that is present in the dances created by many African-American choreographers. Specific modern dance techniques as in the "layout", the reaching in opposite directions while extending one leg in the air, is symbolic of yearning. Eyes, head, and chest lifted upward and open in liturgical dance indicates a summoning of the spirits. In African dance, the articulations of the body, shaking, circling, rocking, syncopations and repetition produce emotional and spiritual states and a calling of the spirit. Although movements may evoke certain qualities, it is *how* the movement is executed that is the essential ingredient necessary to capture the spirit of the dance.

Kirby verbalized his thoughts on the importance of the dancer being able to make those strong emotional connections. The key to being a performer is being able to take those connections and translate them into movement. Being a dancer takes more than being a technician.

> Most dance companies have to know how to do more than ballet, they have to know how to dance. It's nice to be a technician, but they have to know how to dance. They have to know how to turn on those emotions. Ballet has been so removed, so ethereal, so regal. And that's not a problem with that, but you start to lose your audience because they're not emotionally invested, they're not connected.

Nurture Versus Nature

Joan Myers Brown, founder of Philadanco believes, "It isn't about the body, I think it's about the training" (Dixon Gottschild, 2003a, p. 27). "The training for dancers has improved so that black dancers are being trained equally as well as white dancers in this generation" (Dixon Gottschild, 2003a, p. 32). Choreographer Bill T. Jones believes that a body can be taught to do any type of dance with the proper training. It is the repeated exposure to music, dance, and television that becomes part of our identity. We tend to emulate the style of singers, musicians, and dancers that we like. Garth Fagan agrees that we move the way we choose to move. Gus Solomons alleges that all bodies, Black or White, have the same potential. The capability of the Black dancing body to excel in ballet is due to proper training. The capacity for the White dancing body to dance African-derived

dance forms depends on the dancer's ability to master the techniques and "get down" with movement (Dixon Gottschild, 2003a).

Mel Tomlinson who was a principal dancer with the Dance Theatre of Harlem, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, and for New York City Ballet, is proof that African-American dancers can do ballet. He believes that it is a person's talent, not skin color that is the deciding factor in determining who can dance ballet.

> Dance Theatre of Harlem was at first an all-Black ballet company. But there's no such thing as Black ballet. A body is a body, Black or White. It can either do the work or not. It's got talent or not. Anybody in Dance Theatre of Harlem can dance the work in City Ballet, if they have the equipment to work with. Not the skin color, but the equipment, the musicality. But they fit anywhere in the world. Don't say, this is the only place I can dance, this is where I have to go, because it's Black there, because I'm Black. You can be Black in City Ballet, I had to be.

Arthur Mitchell was the first Black male dancer to join New York City Ballet, in1955. He had graduated from the School of American Ballet and was flawless in his technique. Soon George Balanchine was choreographing roles specifically for him, one being the title role in the ballet, *Agon* (Haskins, 1990). It was at Dance Theatre of Harlem that Arthur Mitchell passed the baton and the role to Mel. Years later, in 1981, George Balanchine asked Mel to perform *Agon* at City Ballet, when Peter Martins hurt his back and could not dance the part. Mel described the experience this way,

> I said, 'Next week, I'll be ready' and he said, 'Tomorrow night, you'll do great!' And the curtain goes up and we're performing onstage, and there are

> four men onstage with our backs to the audience...White, White, there's a spade...we turn around and they go, 'Oh!' It was so quiet.

No to "Black Dance"

Nurture versus nature may well be the defining argument in the discussion on "Black Dance." Pierre Lockett has had an impressive career dancing with The Princeton Ballet, The Dance Theatre of Harlem, and the Joffrey Ballet. He began taking ballet classes in his hometown of Mobile, Alabama and then moved to New York, upon receiving a scholarship to study with the Joffrey Ballet. Pierre has performed internationally, providing him a wealth of opportunities through dance.

In Pierre's case, nurture created the person he is today. Through positive role models and the best technical training available, Pierre has had and continues to have a long and prosperous career in ballet. Although Pierre agrees that African dance is a separate genre of dance, he does not believe that "Black Dance" is an exclusive form. He does find, as Jawole indicated, that there are certain values that are apparent in the choreography of African-American artists.

> I think that being Black and the experiences that I have as a Black person...I'm certainly aware of those experiences, but my experiences are different. They're very different because of the profession that I'm in. It's very different because of the people that I'm around. It doesn't mean that I don't see Black or I don't see things like that. But different people have different ideas of what the Black experience is. It's different for each individual depending on where they are, where they live, what they do, where they work, what their background is.

> I don't think it's an exclusive genre... African dance, maybe. But I won't say that's Black dance. ... Some people might think tap is. I don't really think that there is. My training started in a non-black environment and I danced at Dance Theatre of Harlem. It's not ours because we can do it. If you want to look at where came from, it started in France. No, I don't think there is, I'm sorry. There are people who can relate to the "Black Dance" experience, but "Black Dance"... I'm going to say, no.

As many of the participants expressed, there is a dynamic, emotional quality that exists in the dance that African-Americans dancers do. Pierre did admit that depending on the type of piece he choreographs, he may draw from his personal experiences, which includes the Black church. A praise dance based on the Black gospel experience has to be charged with emotion and spiritual energy. Pierre referred to the dance he choreographed for the students at Chicago State University to perform for "An Evening of Fine Arts: Featuring the Joffrey Ballet."

> That piece that I did for the kids, the praise dance piece, *Go Children, Go* it had to be emotional and real. Anybody who has been, I can only say, in the Black gospel experience, particularly in church, and most of those kids have...they understood what I meant by 'At this point, you should be so full of emotional, spiritual energy, and it has to come through in the dance.'

Yes to "Black Dance"

While many dance scholars voice skepticism about categorizing "Black Dance" as a separate form of dance, there are many African-American choreographers who are proponents of "Black Dance." These individuals believe it is necessary to separate "Black Dance."

Peter Fields identified three main components that exist in "Black Dance" in his study, "The Eclectic Approach of Black Dance." He indicated the spiritual connection of Black dance from the past to the present, the music and rhythms of "Black Dance", and the socio-political forces present in the United States. According to Peter, "Black awareness, music, religion, politics, and social forces provide components that generate creativity in the Black experience" (Fields, 1992).

Mel Tomlinson, who danced with Dance Theatre of Harlem, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, and New York City Ballet, and teaches ballet at North Carolina State University, believes that although the concept of "Black Ballet" does not exist, there is a "Black Dance." He describes it is having more soul and believes that it is based on a history of struggle and a strong belief in religion.

> Yes, there is. I only say that there is more apparent soul. And it goes back to the church and that feeling of hardship, slavery, Jesus. A good example would be *Revelations.* We all relate to that, Black or White, but there's that soul that comes out in the dance, the same thing in music. There are certain things that are just Black.
>
> We don't have much, and what we had earlier was taken from us. Did we get credit for tap dance? Fred Astaire gets credit for tap dance. We started in Africa. So a lot of stuff has been lost in time and has been credit to other races. From the Black African stomping on the ground to the Irish cloggers, then to Fred and Gene Kelly...but with Hollywood, it's become Americanized, so we don't get credit. We've got Bill Jangles Robinson...whoopee. Yes, there's "Black Dance."

Mel pondered the concept of "Black Dance" from an historical perspective.

Although he does not want to be labeled as a "Black" dancer, Mel does believe that because dance reflects life, there is a "Black Dance." He further elaborates on the question.

> There's a Black dance, because there's a Black history. And like I say, dance is history, it reflects life. There is a Black dance. And there is more out there and hopefully more appreciation because of Black audiences. There is a separate thing and there is more of an appreciation and more of a demand, I would think.

Although he does not want to be labeled as a "Black" dancer, Mel does believe that because dance reflects life, there is a "Black Dance." He further elaborates on the question.

> Everything! Rhythms, qualities. It's embedded in our society and people don't even know it. Not many people will admit that we've influenced so much. In Africa, dance permeated every aspect of life, from birth to death. There was dance for every occasion. Dance on the plantation was at the will of the owner, for the most part. Only after work was done could the slave relax and move their bodies in a similar fashion to the old ways. However, you must remember, there were no drums allowed and so slaves clapped their hands, stomped their feet, used their bodies as percussive instruments, used wash boards, jugs, chicken bones, etc., to help make rhythms and music.

Joan Burroughs believes that the concept of "Black Dance" is a necessary one because it is one step toward raising social awareness. For Joan, all African-derived dance is "Black Dance" and includes the choreography of the African-American dance legends. It is the choreography of which the only person who has lived the experience is the Black person.

> I have a large category of Black dance. For me, the concept of Black dance is more like bridging the gap and raising social consciousness. I think that the idea and concept of Black dance is necessary. For me, Black dance is African-derived, Ailey, Pomare, Arthur Mitchell, Primus...It's the dancing that Black people have been able to express.
>
> It's embodied knowledge, it's within. But, for me Black dance, I'm gonna tell you includes, and this is hard... but for me it's just necessary. It must be this way, for now. It includes not only the dances that are African derived, it includes the dancing of Ailey, it includes the dancing of Eleo Pomare, it includes the dancing of people who have embraced the dancing of western forms and traditions and made it their own, it includes Arthur Mitchell's work, as Black dance. If I had to start a department of dance, it would be all that.
>
> There would be somebody teaching traditional African dance from some African culture, maybe Ghana, maybe South Africa. It would be somebody teaching hoofing. It would be people learning the traditions according to Ailey, you know based on his choreography. There would be somebody teaching Eleo Pomare's, too.
>
> That's what Black dance is. And it's all of that to me. It's not just the African derived traditions. It's the dancing that Black people have been able to express, and I think it's necessary for the reason I told you before...so that they can know, that these people, key people were the ones, like Pearl Primus and Eleo Pomare. They were dealing with the social issues of the time. And in their dances, you would know that there were also some social issues that they were dealing with and then you had to know that, too.

Gary Abbott proclaimed that "Black Dance" does, in fact, exist. He justifies his position based on the traditions of African-American culture, dance, individual style, and technique. Gary maintains the importance of preserving the traditions and the culture through dance.

> Of course there is. Yes, there is. Of course, there is such a thing as Black dance. And it has a technique and it has a tradition. And it has a background. Those are the things, that when you were talking about, do I think that the traditions are important. That equals Black dance. If you don't have those traditions, then I think that black dance could go away. I think it's in danger of losing its strength and its power...and its power to inspire, to push people forward and to say what it needs to say. If you don't have those tradition, those traditions are part of what it is that you're trying to say. So yes, I do think so.

Gary pointed out that simply because we call it "Black Dance" doesn't limit it to being created only by Black artists. He believes that anyone, from any culture, who understands and is true to the tradition, can create "Black Dance."

> I think anybody can create a dance about Black folk or about Black things. I don't think you have to be a specific thing in order to perpetuate a tradition. I can consider myself a ballet dancer, that's no longer cultural. I can consider myself a Russian dancer, and you know I'm a Black person. So yes, I think you can be anything and create Black dance and contribute to Black dance. I think you can come from whatever culture and as long as what you're doing is understood, as long as it's inside of the tradition.

> I think anyone...you can contribute very well to Black dance. I do not believe that the only people who can do Black dance are Black dancers. And if you look at our company you can tell that. And you just have to be open. You just have to want to do it. You just have to want to be there and be in the process and be true. That's a very interesting question.

Charles Carter recalled this very discussion the first time he attended Bates Dance Festival. The question asked was, "Is there such a thing as Black Dance?" The panelists included African-American choreographers, most who did not agree

that there is Black dance. Charles, however, believes that "Black Dance" is a distinct form.

> Yes, when I went to Bates, the first year, the major question was, "Is there such a thing as Black dance?" And they had on that panel...I remember Kevin Wynn, Bebe Miller, Dianne McIntyre, and there were a couple of other people. And most of those people said there was no such thing as Black dance. And I think even Arthur Mitchell will say there is no such thing as Black dance.
>
> I think there is. I think there is because our stories are different, or it's just our history is different...and we often tell about our history. And we move, like I told you earlier, we're angular. Take the Cakewalk...Now the slaves are looking in the windows, so they're seeing this debutante ball. But they're taking that and making that their own... Because Black dance is usually angular. We're just an angular people. I don't know if you're aware of that. Did you know that?
>
> We do a lot of improv and do not set the improv, we just do the improv. Not on the concert stage, but in life. And it has to do with a certain dynamism. It has to be dynamic. And I think all those things, and it has to be asymmetrical and off the beat. So, all that to me, is Black dance.

Charles is not the first dance scholar to point out the dynamic quality present in Black dance. Kirby Reed also talked about the strong emotional connections. Dancer Gus Solomons points out the fiery quality behind the movement, "A kind of hyper energy...those legs had power behind them...when black dancers move...they take advantage of those strong connections in their bodies so they can be reckless in a way that white dancers can't be" (Dixon Gottschild, 2003, p. 31). I have witnessed this very intense quality, myself.

Charles agrees with Gary, that anyone can create "Black Dance." He justifies this statement by adding that, "You'd better know what you're doing." African-American dance requires using African-American dance steps.

> Your next question is probably, "Can anybody choreograph Black dance?" Because that's what most people say. That's your dividing line. Well, anybody can choreograph Black dance. That's what people say. But then, anybody can choreograph ballet.... So sure, I would think that anybody can choreograph it. But I think that, also, if you're doing ballet, you'd better know what you're doing....
>
> Then if you're doing African-American dance, then you have to do African-American steps. Now, do you have to use African-American music? No...because you can interpret music any kind of way you want... Anybody (can dance it) that can do it well. I think it depends... You can do African-American dance with all White people, right? Right? For example, if you're doing something about slavery, then what part is going to be played?...I think other people can do African-American dance...

Dance Quality

Gus Solomons identified an attitude that defines what black is; "one of risk and daring, emotionally and or physically" (Dixon Gottschild, 2003, p. 36). Bebe Miller also comments on "a particular fierceness...a force behind them...that is sort of proving itself" (Dixon Gottschild, 2003, p. 49). It cannot be denied that there is a Charles raised an interesting point with the question, "How Black is Black enough?" He expressed that "Black Dance" must be lived rather than learned. This brings up the issue again, of Nurture versus Nature. If a person is exposed to Black definite sensibility or African aesthetic in the choreography of African American

artists. It is not only the movement being executed, but how the movement is done. music and Black culture and Black dance, will they be Black enough? Will they naturally or through training acquire the qualities in order to dance Black?

> I guess that's what Black dance is. You've got to be Black enough in your movement, not in your face, but in your movement. You know, because...you know, a lot of Black dance is taken from the vernacular, the street dance. So, if you haven't lived that, then it's hard to learn. You know, some of that stuff just comes naturally. And where do you get to learn...you really don't get a chance to learn Black dance. No, I take that back. Because if you think of hip-hop as Black dance, a lot of White, not just White, Japanese, Chinese...it's all over now. So, I guess it depends on what it is. Concert dance, if we're going back in that area...I think...it's hard.
>
> Even if you look at DTH (Dance Theatre of Harlem) to me, they look different, because they have a different way of moving. And they will do ballet, it's just Arthur Mitchell's thing, and it just doesn't look the same. If you look out in that showcase, when you leave, you'll see Stephanie Dabney doing "The Firebird" and that leap, to me, it just doesn't look like what a Russian ballerina, the way she would leap, it just doesn't. Or maybe just because of the way she looks, maybe that's what it is.... Because you have to be dynamic. If you're not dynamic, we know that the audience is not going to accept what you're doing. So why wouldn't you look different when you do Black ballet? You're going to look different anyway, because your body shape is different. So you're going to move different. And you're going to look different.... Because you're a Black person. You know you're going to move differently.

Summary

The question, "What is Black Dance?" or should such a term even exist raises an interesting and ongoing discussion. Previous research on this topic has been met with mixed reviews and remains to be answered. The participants in this

study have mixed reactions to the question as well. Iantha, Randy, Dianne, Kirby, Germaul, and Jawole believe there is a distinct African-American aesthetic present in the choreographic works of many African-American artists. Pierre does not believe that there is a separate genre of dance called "Black Dance" and that the concept is unnecessary. Joan, Charles, Mel, Peter, and Gary believe "Black Dance" does exist and that the concept is a necessary one.

The varied answers to this question appear to be based on the experiences and philosophical beliefs of each individual. "Nurture versus nature" may be the best argument in coming to terms with the construct of labeling dance as "Black" or "White." With proper training, the dancing body can be taught to execute many styles of dance. The choreographic intent of the artist will also inspire and influence the dancer's performance level. The concept of "Black Dance" or White dance is a social construct reflective of the values and cultural beliefs imbedded in a particular culture and time. As long as there are diverse ways of knowing and thinking about our life world, there will be disagreement to this question.

CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Overview

If art reflects life, then dance is a living history of its people. Through the medium of dance, we can learn much about a society and culture at any given point in time. Why do African-American artists create choreography and what do they choreograph about? The purpose of this study was to gain understanding of how the dance experience provides meaning for some African-American artists. What role has dance making played and continues to play for these artists and educators? How do these African-American professional dancers, choreographers and dance educators perceive the medium of dance 1) as a voice to tell their stories, communicate, and create social awareness and 2) as a way to create meaning from these experiences.

Dance has provided a vehicle for African Americans to preserve cultural traditions, maintain ethnic identity, become empowered and experience freedom. This study reveals the ways that some African-American artists view dance and the creative process, and how dance creates meaning in their lives. Interviews were conducted over a two year period from a convenient sample of twelve African-

American dancers, choreographers, and dance educators from professional dance companies and universities to obtain the answers to the following research questions: 1) Why, how, and what do these African-American dancers choreograph about; 2) How does the dance experience provide meaning for them; and 3) What are their perceptions of the meaning of "Black Dance."

The dancers, choreographers, and educators in this study told their personal stories disclosing how dance has provided them an outlet of expression and has been a way to make meaning in their lives. The narrative stories of people's lives offer one way to learn the meaning individuals give to their experiences. Stories play an integral role in our lives in helping us understand who we are and our identity situated within our culture (Shank, 2002). The medium of dance, also a form of storytelling, allows for the possibility of gaining understanding of life experiences through creative expression.

The life histories provided the data for the findings of the study. Although the life histories contained data used to examine the three areas of investigation, the results were subject to multiple frames of analysis. The individuals in this study do not employ one process or motivation when choreographing. The data revealed how these dancers, choreographers, and educators take what they have learned about self from personal experiences and transform that knowledge into dance. The dance making of these individuals comes from their personal experience and outside

forces (i.e. life experience; socio-political, and economic forces; history; music; and religion) which were manifested in their choreographic works (Figure 1.). Their culture informs their view, which in turn, informs their art and creates a new and transformed culture of awareness.

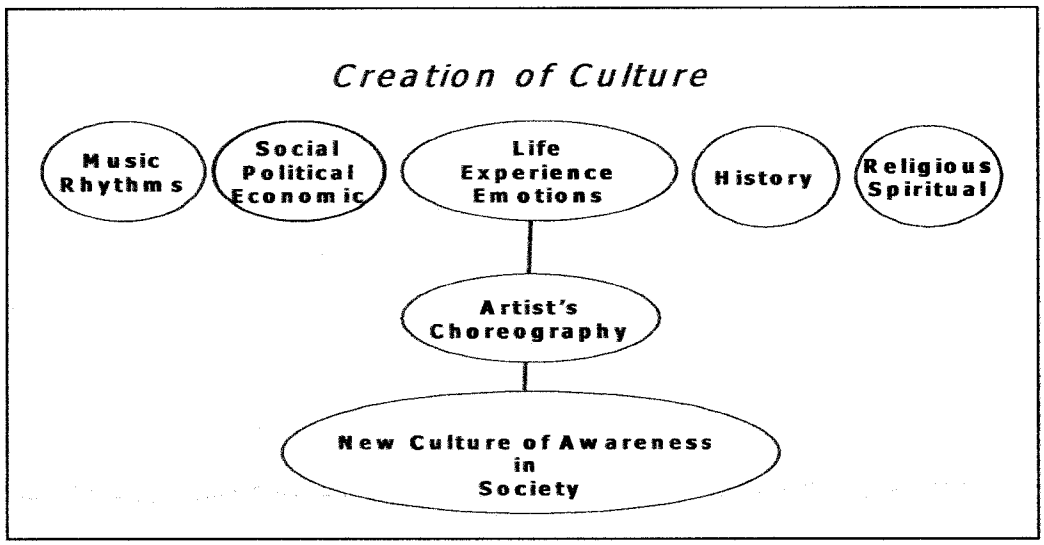

Figure 1. Creation of Culture

The first area of investigation, Why, How, and What Do These African-American Dancers Choreograph About, revealed three categories to describe how the subjects view the role of dance choreography: Dance as Description, Dance as Educational Discourse, and Dance as Prescription.

Why, How, and What Do They Choreograph About?

Dance as Description

Many of the participants interviewed employ the African tradition of story telling through dance, they use Dance as Description. Randy Duncan, Kirby Reed, Mel Tomlinson, and Pierre Lockett all use the medium of dance to tell a story or make a statement. These individuals believe that dance should make sense and that the audience should be able to understand and enjoy the work, whether they are inspired or simply entertained.

While the other choreographers in this study may also use dance to tell a story, the motivation behind their work emanates from different positions. Joan Hamby Burroughs, Iantha Tucker, Dianne Maroney-Grigsby, and Peter Fields use dance to tell stories, but they take an educative approach creating choreography with historical, cultural, religious or life themes. Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, Charles Carter, Gary Abbott, and Germaul Barnes employ a storytelling format of a prescriptive nature creating works to incite awareness of social issues or to affect change.

Life experience, as in the works of many choreographers, is one source of inspiration for the participants in this study. What may be of interest is that the topics these contemporary artists use to create their choreography are emotionally charged. These artists draw upon emotional feelings that stem from personal events and use dance as an outlet for their feelings. The choreography of these artists is a

reflection of emotions experienced as the result of particular life changing events. The individuals in this study use the medium of dance as a physical expression of emotion.

The participants in this study who have used dance to express strong feelings and emotions are Randy, Kirby, Pierre, and Joan. When queried as to why they choreograph, the following emotional responses emerged through the analysis of data: anger, grief, betrayal, and love. Although Joan's choreographic stance comes from an educative position, one cannot deny the emotional power in her work. In the selected works of Randy, Kirby, Pierre, and Peter, love is a negative emotion, inflicted with pain and betrayal. While Peter choreographs about emotional experiences, his purpose is to create a dialogue and learn from these experiences. Whether the emotions are anger, grief, love or betrayal, dance can provide an emotional release.

One of the strongest influences on the choreography of the participants in this study is grief and loss. Kirby and Pierre used deep feelings of loss over the passing of their brothers to inspire their choreography in *Forty Dollars* and *Touch Me*, respectively. Kirby also channeled feelings of desperation in *Descent*. Randy expressed feelings of grief over losing his personal friend and mentor to AIDS in *Turning Tides*. The medium of dance has been one way to purge feelings of grief and negative emotions. While these emotions may serve to frame their work, this does not necessarily mean that the choreographic work is dark and depressing. One

could argue that the intensity of their pieces comes from their strong emotional experiences.

Choreographing about life experience is not unique to the participants in this study. Artists have been inspired by life events to create dance since the beginning of time. The choreographic works of many African-American artists was an expression of life, a reflection of the times and a response to social, political, economic, and even cultural conditions of the times (Daly, 2002; Garafola, 1994; Goler, 1995; Lacy, 2000; Malone, 1996; Prevots, 1998; Sherrod, 1998). The following works are a small representation of choreography that reflect the African-American experience: Alvin Ailey's *Revelations*; Katherine Dunham's *Barrel House Blues*; Pearl Primus's *Hard Time Blues*; Talley Beatty's *Southern Landscape*; Donald McKayle's *Games*; Blondell Cummings' *Chicken Soup*; and Garth Fagan's *Griot New York* (Lacy, 2000). The African-American experience had become a source of inspiration for artists.

Looking at the work of African-American choreographers who have used dance as a form of storytelling is the first step toward understanding the role dance choreography plays in interpreting and making meaning of one's world (Goler, 1995). Dixon Gottschild refutes this concept, "I've never understood why 'black' dance has been characterized as narrative. Africanist dance is symbolic movement. It may tell stories, but these stories are about the movement itself and about the concepts - the body dancing its symbols" (Dixon Gottschild, 2003a, p. 261).

Whether the choreographer's intent is to convey a story or create an abstract work, one cannot deny the emotional power in the choreography of many African-American artists. The intensity in their work may come from personal experiences or those embodied by ancestral memories. Their choreography may be a reflection of a life wrought with pain, sorrow, joy, or revered memories. To view the performance of a primarily African-American dance company is to feel passion and strength. What is it about the African-American dance experience that makes it so emotional and powerful?

Throughout the course of North American history, African Americans have dealt with issues of social, political, economic, and even cultural discrimination. It is not surprising that feelings of anger and resentment would be infused in the choreography of some of the participants in this study. Bill T. Jones corroborates this view when he describes some of his choreography as possessing "a burning sense of righteous anger and indignation" (Jones, quoted in Dixon Gottschild, 2003a, p. 232).

While most people may admit to feeling betrayed by someone at least once in their lifetime, the history of African Americans in this country has been one of great struggle and betrayal. It is not surprising that several of the participants harbor strong feelings of anger and resentment. Whether these feelings emanate from remembered, related, or embodied experiences that have been internalized, these feelings need to be released. Dance provides an outlet for these emotions.

The reasons revealed by the participants in this study as to why they choreograph support prior research on dance as an expression of emotion. In well-known anthropologist, dancer, choreographer Katherine Dunham's study on Black dancers in the Caribbean Islands, she discovered that dance served the psychological function of externalizing internal feelings (Dunham, 1983). For some people, the creative process can be a way to express these feelings. Dance can be the catharsis needed to bring internalized feelings of anger, resentment, and repression to our consciousness and the conscience of society. The choreographer takes these feelings and interprets them, creating an artistic form (Langer, 1978).

All of the individuals in this study revealed a concern for creating meaningful choreography that has a message. The responses indicate that these individuals not only possess a deep respect for their art but a respect for the audience coming to view their work. They do not create abstract dance without a purpose. These very talented choreographers want to be taken seriously and respected. This need may stem from a long history of African Americans having to continually prove themselves in a European-American culture. It may also come from the desire to make meaning of their personal lives.

Dance as Educational Discourse

The artists who primarily use the medium of dance as "Educational Discourse" include Peter Fields, Joan Hamby Burroughs, Iantha Tucker, and Dianne

Maroney-Grigsby. These individuals use choreography to communicate, create a forum for discussion, and educate. Peter uses choreography to communicate issues the community may be facing and dialogue with his students about these problems. Joan uses her choreographic skills in teaching multicultural students. Iantha takes an educative approach in her choreography to teach her students and the community about the history of African Americans. Dianne is inspired by gospel music to create choreographic works with a religious base.

Dance has played and continues to play an integral role in African-American culture. One role of Dance as Educational Discourse is to teach the historical and religious significance of dance in African-American culture. Although these choreographers believe some dances automatically retain cultural traditions, they realize the importance of preserving the history of African Americans in dance. These artists use their choreography to educate and communicate. For many of the participants in this study, dance is the way they best communicate their thoughts. These artists use their bodies not only to express feelings but create a dialogue about these feelings and open up a conversation about issues that may seem a bit sensitive.

Telling life stories through dance is not unique to this group of choreographers. What is of interest is that many of these choreographers are inspired by their experience in the Black church. Perhaps it was Alvin Ailey who forged the way with his masterpiece, *Revelations,* choreographed in 1960, that generations of choreographers to come would follow suit. Inspired by the Negro spirituals he

remembered as a child, *Revelations* tells the stories of the African-American experience, the hardships, and the struggle to survive. According to Judith Jamison, "*Revelations* is a reflection of the journey we all take in life...it's about people who survive..." (Jamison, quoted in Moss, 2003, p. 199).

Religious beliefs and attitudes also shape the way and the reasons people dance. In African culture, dance plays a central role in worship. Dance has always been recognized as an important aspect of Black life and as a central element in African-American religion. Peter states, "We danced our services." Several of the participants commented on having a deep spiritual connection to God and the universe that guides them while teaching or in the process of creating choreography.

The choreographers interviewed have a deep spiritual connection. Some have expressed these feelings through their choreography using religious music and themes while others believe that it is a spiritual force that guides them to do their work. One can only believe that it is because of this strong connection to God that the African-American has been able to survive despite a history of slavery, discrimination, and injustice. In the words of Kariamu Welsh, "We are the children of those who would not die" (2007).

Dance brings people together. Whether to socialize, be entertained or to explore new styles of dance through an educational or recreational setting, dance can create a sense of community, bridging the gap between cultures. Because movement is the means of expression in dance, people from all cultures and

ethnicities can partake in the dance experience. These choreographers believe that dance has the power to cross into other cultures because it is possible to communicate without words through movement. Dance is a language with many dialects.

Some of the choreographers interviewed believe that dance is the universal language. This opinion appears to be based on their extensive experience either performing in or choreographing for professional dance companies internationally. As performers, choreographers, or educators these individuals have all had positive experiences dancing outside of their own culture. For some, the universality may stem from the use of codified technique or ballet vocabulary. For others, it may be found in the ability of the human body to express emotion and feeling. For some, it is present in the deep spirituality of the movement. For others, the universality comes from being able to communicate with other cultures. The above mentioned choreographers agree that dance can be understood and appreciated by all cultures. The body as the instrument of expression speaks many languages through dance. Dance is one way to transcend political, social, cultural, racial, and ethnic boundaries.

Dance as Prescription

An ongoing question in the arts is whether the responsibility of the artist is a social responsibility. The artists in this study, as well as many noted African-

American artists, believe dance is an effective medium for raising awareness of social issues. Jawole Willa Jo Zolar, Charles Carter, Gary Abbott, and Gemaul Barnes all use Dance as Prescription. They believe that it is their responsibility to raise awareness, their choreography and philosophical beliefs indicating this.

Dance as Prescription, examines the role of dance as a way to create awareness of social issues, and in some cases create change. Jawole takes risks with her choreography in dealing with personal and social issues. Charles uses his choreography not only to create awareness of problems the community is facing, but also to make his audience realize they are responsible for solving these problems. Gary addresses social issues in his choreography to provoke the audience into awareness of these problems and the realization that these problems can affect anyone. Germaul creates works with social topics to stimulate a discussion.

The medium of dance has been used to expose social injustice and inequality. Choreography can be an effective medium in fostering the reflective discourse necessary to create awareness and in some instances, change. Dance has been one medium allowing artists to communicate feelings and create dialogue about issues that may be sensitive. Because African Americans in this country have been the victims of discriminatory practices is reason enough to expose these injustices. Fostering a reflective discourse about these issues is one small step toward righting the wrongs of the past and creating a just future. Although most of the choreographers in this study want to convey a message or theme in their work,

these individuals are not limited to or restricted by creating works only intended to change the society.

Using the medium of dance as way to make social comments through choreography is not new. Many choreographers have used dance as a way to speak out about social injustices. Previous studies which document the choreographic works of African-American dance legends support the findings of this study. The following choreographic works serve as examples: Pearl Primus's *Strange Fruit*; Katherine Dunham's *Southland*; Alvin Ailey's *Masekela Langage*; Donald McKayle's *Rainbow 'Round My Shoulder*; Talley Beatty's *The Black Belt*; Eleo Pomare's *Blues for the Jungle;* and Rod Rodgers' *Now Nigga* (Dunning, 1996; Emery, 1988; Haskins, 1990; Lacy, 2000; Long, 1989; Perpener, 2001). The salient themes that emerged within their choreography were primarily a reaction to the socio-political, economic, and even cultural conditions of the times. These choreographic legends all used the medium of dance to raise public awareness of the social injustices African Americans experienced in the United States. The salient themes in the choreography of the above artists provided the basis for my study.

The data from the interviews I conducted both supported and refuted my initial theoretical framework of dance as critical social theory, or "Dance as a Vehicle of Social Activism." The findings confirm my initial hypotheses that some African-American artists use dance to raise awareness of social issues and in some

instances create change, but they do not all view their work as a vehicle of social activism. Although most of the choreographers in this study want to convey a message or theme in their work, these individuals are not limited to or restricted by creating works only intended to change society. The participants in this study employ the medium of dance as a means to raise social awareness and in some instances create change, but they do not perceive themselves to be social activists or agents of change.

How the Dance Experience Provides Meaning

How does the dance experience provide meaning for the African-American dancer, choreographer and dance educator? The medium of dance enable the artists to express their views about the world. The process of creating a dance can provide a meaningful experience for the creator, which become complete when the dancer and audience are impacted by the piece. The creative process can help the choreographer create meaning and gain an understanding of self. Dance can be one vehicle that allows African-American choreographers to tell their story, create awareness in society and become self-actualized. For the participants in this study, dance is not just a career, it is a way of life. Dance has empowered, transformed and liberating.

Many of these artists share similar feelings of empowerment because they have had similar dance experiences. Feelings of empowerment come from having a

strong sense of self, cultural identification, and being able to make those strong connections with the past. For some of the participants, this has meant having to overcome obstacles, negative stereotypes and discrimination. Joan and Jawole experienced discrimination at an early age but were able to develop strong identities through dance.

Mel and Germaul articulated they each wanted to be known as a good dancer and person, not as a Black dancer. Pierre related his experience with Dance Theater of Harlem and having to prove African Americans could do ballet. Although Randy had already developed strong self-esteem at a young age, his success as a dancer did not come about without preparation and determination. Mel, Germaul, and Pierre expressed that it was not luck, but through hard work and discipline they achieved success in the dance world. Kirby echoed the importance of having a strong work ethic and taking nothing for granted. These artists are proud to have successful careers in dance. They were able to gain self-esteem, pride, a sense of value and importance through dance. Dianne and Mel are happy to be able to share their talent and experience in dance by giving back to others. Gary is grateful that he can inspire others through his choreography and is happy to do so.

Because dancers work so closely with each other, they often experience a camaraderie that people in other occupations may never experience with their co-workers. The act of dance, in itself, requires close bodily contact and touching as dancers work together to accomplish feats of daring. They must have discipline,

work cooperatively together as an ensemble, and develop trust in their partners. The participants in this study, have not only worked with some of the most renown choreographers in dance, but have developed meaningful and lasting relationships with their mentors and fellow dancers.

The importance of family and community is expressed by the following individuals. Joan described feelings of belonging and acceptance by other cultures through dance. Pierre recalled Dance Theatre of Harlem being like a family. Kirby described the Joel Hall Dance Center as being like a family and Joel as a father figure. Gary admired Donald McKayle for his ability to have both a professional dance career and a family. Jawole formed her dance company out of a desire to have a group of dancers who would work together with the same goals. The above dancers have all experienced feelings of closeness and family through the dance experience.

Many of the dancers in this study have been transformed emotionally, spiritually, and physically. Randy related how dance took him outside of the realistic world. Joan described dance as offering a world of possibilities. Gary compared choreographing to a physical dream and expressed feeling like a proud parent watching a child when viewing his work. He also recounted how dance can make a person realize just how valuable you are. Germaul spoke of breaking down barriers human beings create through dance. Pierre attributed dance

to creating the person he has become. For Randy, dance is his life.

Dance can provide transforming opportunities during a performance while portraying a character onstage. Pierre and Gary described becoming so immersed in their role that they assumed a different identity during the performance becoming that character. Many of these artists have also indicated having a deep spiritual connection. Mel spoke of feeling a connection to God through dance. For others it has been a spiritual transformation and guidance by a force or higher power. Randy and Gary described a spiritual force or guidance present with them during the creative act. Joan and Germaul also spoke of a spiritual force that is present during the dance experience. Pierre related becoming a spiritual vessel during a performance. Kirby disclosed that he believes he has been put on this earth for a purpose and that his work is not finished. Randy and Joan referred to the embodied knowledge that is revealed in their choreography. Research on Alvin Ailey and Bill T. Jones supports the calling upon "blood memories" as a force that guides the artist in the creative act (Dixon Gottschild, 2003a). One can only surmise that African-Americans have been able to survive a history of slavery, discrimination, and injustice because of this strong connection to God.

The dance experience can be liberating both emotionally and physically. Many of these individual have traveled the world and experienced a life they would have never known outside of dance. For Kirby, dance is a way to relieve stress. He describes the experience as an emotional release or cleansing of the spirit through

the choreographic act. Germaul believes that dance is a truthful kind of expression. Gary finds that dance is the most honest thing you can do. For others, it just makes feels them good to move when dancing. Randy has always had a keen awareness of his body and how to lengthen everything. Jawole loves movement and motion. Charles fancies that dancers use their bodies to communicate even when not performing. For Iantha, dance is so much fun!

Dance has provided feelings of empowerment, transformation, and liberation for the artists in this study. The findings support the literature on the important role dance has played for African Americans throughout history, from slavery to the present. From the Ring Shout to the Cakewalk, from the concert stage to the streets, dance has been used for entertainment, celebration, ceremony, and ritual. Dance has been a way to make social statements and to express the lived experience. Dance has not only helped to define history, but has been a catalyst to change conditions in society. Dance has provided a vehicle for helping African Americans preserve cultural traditions, maintain ethnic identity, become empowered, and experience freedom.

What Are Their Perceptions of the Meaning of Black Dance?

The question, "What is Black dance?" or should such a term as Black dance even exist raises an interesting and ongoing discussion. Previous research on this topic has met with mixed reviews and remains to be answered. The participants in

this study have mixed reactions to the question, as well. Iantha, Randy, Dianne, Kirby, Germaul, and Jawole believe there is an African-American aesthetic present in the choreographic works of many African-American artists. Pierre does not believe that there is a separate genre of dance called "Black Dance" and that the concept is unnecessary. Joan, Charles, Mel, Peter, and Gary believe that the concept of "Black Dance" is a necessary one.

The varied answers to this question appear to be based on the experiences and philosophical beliefs of each individual. "Nurture versus nature" may be the best argument in coming to terms with the construct of labeling dance as "Black" or "White." With proper training, the dancing body can be taught to execute many styles of dance. The choreographic intent of the artist will also inspire and influence the dancer's performance level. The concept of "Black Dance" or "White Dance" is a social construct reflective of the values and cultural beliefs imbedded in a particular culture and time. As long as there are diverse ways of knowing and thinking about our life world, there will be disagreement to this question.

Significance

This study explored the reasons why some African-American dancers, choreographers, and educators choreograph, how they choreograph, and what they choreograph about. The study also investigated how the dance experience

provides meaning for these individuals and their perceptions of the meaning of "Black Dance." Although we know dance has been used as a vehicle of expression for artists, and of particular interest in this study, the African-American artist, prior research has not explored what the dance experience means to these individuals. Previous studies have not explored the creation of dance as both a personal and cultural phenomenon for African Americans. No one has looked at how the African-American artist is impacted by internal and external forces and how these forces become manifested in the work they create.

The analysis revealed how outside forces (i.e., life experience, socio-political and economic forces, history, music, and religion) impact the artist and become manifested in their choreographic works. The findings disclosed how these artists take what they have learned about self from personal experiences (i.e., life, emotions) and transform that knowledge it into dance. The dance making of these individuals comes from their personal experience. Their culture informs their view, which influences their art, manifesting itself in the choreography they create, producing a new and transformed culture of awareness.

The reasons the participants in this study choreograph are descriptive, educative, and prescriptive in nature. They use dance to tell stories, communicate, educate, raise awareness of social issues, and in some instances create change in society. The findings indicated these individuals found the dance experience to be

empowering, transforming, and liberating. Several of the participants disclosed the dance experience provided an emotional, spiritual, or physical release.

The data revealed the importance for these individuals to be respected and valued for their work. They want to create awareness of problems that affect society and educate people on the necessity of finding solutions to create change. While dance may be utilized for different purposes employing various styles and musical accompaniment, in all cultures, dance is dance. Several of the participants believe dance is the universal language.

Although there was no agreement regarding the use of the term "Black Dance," the participants indicated an African-American aesthetic present in the choreographic works of African-American artists. The literature supports the presence of an African-American aesthetic in the choreography of many African-American artists. It is present in the choreographer's intent, the movements, choice of music, and the dancers' interpretation and emotive force behind the choreography. That quality is what makes the African-American dance experience unique.

The choreographic experience is deeply rooted in African-American life experience. Although life experience (that is, the Black experience) is embedded in many of the choreographic works, the individuals in this study want to be known as dancers, choreographers, and educators first, not separated as Black dancers. They want to be acknowledged for their contributions as people, as human beings, as

artists, and scholars. More than separating these artists as "Black artists", they suggest looking for the likenesses and similarities between people.

Dance offers a way to gain an understanding of ourselves through artistic expression within a cultural context. The role of dance in education can contribute to a greater understanding of ourselves and of our world by helping us realize how our personal experiences have shaped our views (Shapiro, 1998). The body as the instrument is the source of expression in dance. It is also the site for critical reflection and the embodiment of all of our experiences. The body defines who we are. When we shed the traditional assumptions about dance (i.e., body type, race, gender), dance can be liberating physically and emotionally (Shapiro, 1998).

Why is this important to adult educators? Taking the humanist perspective of Maslow and Rogers, the goal of adult education is self-actualization (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Dance can be an effective medium for aiding in the self-actualization process. Through the performance, choreographic, or teaching experience, dance can provide the individual the medium to create meaning, gain awareness and better understand self and life. The creative process allows individuals the opportunity to explore life issues through this unique art form. For those who embrace dance as a career, it affords the chance to learn something new about oneself with each experience. As adult educator and philosopher, Jack Mezirow stated, "There is no need more fundamentally human than our need to make sense of our experiences" (Mezirow, 1990, p. 11).

Through art, we are able to understand the values of a culture and society during any point in time. By listening to the stories other people tell, we can gain new insight into our own lives and new ways of knowing the world. Examining the choreographic works of these individuals and other choreographers can provide adult educators a vehicle for creating discourse about life issues which may be otherwise too sensitive to discuss. Employing an arts-based educational approach can foster the discourse necessary to create the reflective critical thinking necessary to create social awareness and change (Clover, 2006). "All genuine education comes about through experience" (Dewey, 1938, p. 13).

Implications for Research

This study focused on the reasons some African-American choreographers create dance. This study looked at how the dance experience provides meaning for the artists in this study. One area this study did not address was the economic and socio-cultural factors contributing to the success of a career in dance. There is a need for further research to investigate a more diverse background of dancers by investigating the implications of class on training and opportunity.

This study analyzed the perceptions of twelve African-American dancers, eight who were male and four who were female. From the researcher's annual participation at the Black College Dance Convention and attendance at professional dance concerts, it appears that African-American male dance instructors and

choreographers outnumber the African-American female dance instructors and choreographers. The ratio of African-American males to females in achieving a successful career in dance is another area for investigation.

Summary

This study illuminates an area in dance that has not received sufficient attention. It provides new insight into the meaning of the choreographic process. The voices of contemporary African-American artists must be heard to continue the legacy of African Americans in dance. The life histories of the African-American artists in this study shed light on the role of dance not only as a form of expression, but as a creation of culture. Looking at the world through the choreography of these artists can provide a means to understand the past and inform the future.

This study is a contribution to research as an historical documentation on the role of dance for these African-American choreographers in American society during the twenty-first century. This study bridges the gap between dance, life, and education. Understanding the role choreography has played for African-American artists broadens the perspectives of dance scholars everywhere. This study illuminates an area that has not been studied before and adds to the existing literature on dance by supplementing it with interviews from contemporary African-American professional dancers, choreographers and dance educators about the role dance plays as a form of expression and meaning.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

LETTER OF INFORMED CONSENT

Dance: A Vehicle of Social Activism in Adult Education for African Americans

You have been selected as a subject for the research project titled: *Dance: A Vehicle of Social Activism in Adult Education for African Americans,* because of your expertise in the field of dance as a professional choreographer or dance educator.

I agree to participate in the research project titled, *Dance: A Vehicle of Social Activism in Adult Education for African Americans,* being conducted by Debra J. Nelson, a graduate student at Northern Illinois University. I have been informed that the purpose of the study is to examine the medium of dance as a platform to expose the social injustices of African Americans.

I understand that if I agree to participate in this study, I will be asked to do the following:
Answer oral interview questions relating to my experience and understanding of how dance contributes to raising awareness of social issues and of affecting change in society. The approximate time of each interview will be one hour.

I am aware that my participation is voluntary and may be withdrawn at any time without penalty or prejudice, and that if I have any additional questions concerning this study, I may contact, Dr. Amy Rose at (815) 753-9373. I understand that if I wish further information regarding my rights as a research subject, I may contact the Office of Research Compliance at Northern Illinois University at (815) 753-8588.

I understand that the intended benefits of this study include the opportunity to voice personal experiences regarding the meaning of choreography by African Americans, and contribute to the existing body of knowledge on African American dance.

I have been informed that there are no foreseeable risks and/or discomforts that I will experience from this study. I am aware that my name will be used and I will be quoted in the report. I understand that all information gathered during this experiment (copies of transcripts/recordings) will be made available or returned to me, and that I will receive a copy of the full report on the results of the study. The records (data and recordings) will be available to researchers or they may be donated to a library archive.

I realize that Northern Illinois University policy does not provide for compensation for, nor does the University carry insurance to cover any injury or illness incurred as a result of participation in University approved research projects.

I understand that my consent to participate in this project does not constitute a waiver of any legal rights or redress I might have as a result of my participation, and I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent form.

_____

Signature of Subject Date

I consent to being audio tape-recorded during this interview.

_____

Signature of Subject Date

I consent to being video tape-recorded during this interview.

_____

Signature of Subject Date

APPENDIX B

PARTICIPANTS

Dance Training:

(JB) *Dr. Joan Burroughs*: Tuskegee University (BA), Leticia Williams, Margaret Cheniere; Duke University, Arthur Hall; Indiana University (MS); Birmingham, Al., Ann Ashton, Laura Knox;; Katherine Dunham; Pearl Primus; New York University, Dance Anthropology (Ph. D.) "Haitian Ceremonial Dance on the Concert Stage: The Contextual Transference and Transformation of Yanvalou"

(Di) *Dianne Maroney-Grigsby:* Alvin Ailey, Sylvia Waters, Talley Beatty, Donald McKayle, Ulysses Dove, Tom Stevens, Denise Jefferson, Mel Tomlinson; (BA) Grambling State University; (MA) Louisiana Tech University

(IT) *Dr. Iantha Tucker:* Buddy Phillips, Syvilla Fort; Vera Cole; Morgan State University (BA), (MS); New York University (Ph. D) "The Role of African Americans in Dance: From Slavery to the Present"

(PF) *Dr. Peter Fields:* Ailey School; Homer Bryant (Dance Theatre of Harlem); James Truitte (Dayton Contemporary Dance Company); Dr. Ann Shea; Bowling Green State University (BA); Ohio State (MA); The Union Institute (Ph. D) "The Eclectic Approach of Black Dance"

(CC) *Dr. Charles Carter:* Frostberg State College; West Virginia University; New York w/ James Truitte, Katherine Dunham, Talley Beatty; Baltimore w/ Eva Anderson (African American Dance Company)

(RD) *Randy Duncan:* Sammy Dyer School of Theatre; Geraldine Johnson; Joseph Holmes; Harriet Ross; Ailey School, Pearl Lang, Bertram Ross, Pepsi Bethel, Pat Thomas

(JWZ) *Jawole Willa Jo Zollar:* Joseph Stevenson (Katherine Dunham); University of Missouri (BA); Dianne McIntyre; Florida State (MFA)

(GB) *Germaul Barnes*: the High School of the Arts; The University of the Arts in Philadelphia; Milton Myers; Cleo Parker Robinson, Eleo Pomare, Donald McKayle, Katherine Dunham, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar;

(PL) *Pierre Lockett*: social dancing while at the University of Montevallo (Alabama); ballet classes in Mobile, AL; Joffrey Ballet School on scholarship; Dance Theatre of Harlem on scholarship and apprenticeship (Arthur Mitchell, Geoffrey Holder); Princeton Ballet;

(KR) *Kirby Reed:* Joel Hall Dance Center;

(GA) *Gary Abbott:* African dance at the Atlanta Dance Theater with Barbara Sullivan; modern, ballet at various companies in the area; scholarship student at the California School of the Arts in Valencia, CA; Rudy Perez Dance Theater; Los Angeles Dance Theater; Lula Washington Dance Theater; Sidewalk Dance Company in Knoxville, TN; Cleo Parker Robinson Dance Ensemble in Denver, CO with Donald McKayle, Katherine Dunham, Talley Beatty, Eleo Pomare,

(MT) *Mel Tomlinson:* Arthur Mitchell-Dance Theatre of Harlem; Agnes DeMille; Alvin Ailey-AAADT; George Balanchine-New York City Ballet; Charles Honi Coles

APPENDIX C

QUESTIONNAIRE

The Interview Questions:

Personal Background

1. Please tell me something about yourself.

2. What is your dance background?
    a. Where did you study dance?
    b. How long have you been a dancer? Choreographer? Dance educator?

3. Why did you become a choreographer/dance educator?

4. What role has dance played in your life?

Dance as Feeling

5. How does dance serve as a form of self-expression?

6. How do you feel when you dance?

7. How do you feel when you choreograph?

Dance as Meaning

8. What do you try to communicate to your audience through your choreography?
    a. What is your goal?
    b. How does the audience influence your choreography?
    c. Do you try to please your audience or shock them?
    d. Do you have a message to convey?
    e. To reach certain groups?

The Process

9. Tell me about the process you go through when you choreograph?
    a. Where do your ideas come from?
    b. Are the dancers a part of the choreographic process?

10. What would you say the relationship of your choreography is to the music/rhythm?

11. How has your choreography changed through the years?

Influences

12. What has been the greatest influence in your choreography (social issues, autobiography, etc.)?

13. Who has been the greatest influence on your choreography?

The Role of Dance

14. What do you feel the role of dance is in American society?

15. In what ways does art imitate life?

16. How important is the political, social, economic and cultural context to understanding the work of the choreographer?

17. What are some examples of choreographic works (yours or others) that express social statements?

18. In what ways can choreographers raise public awareness of social injustices?

19. Do you think that dance is an effective art medium in raising public awareness?

20. In what ways can choreographers affect change in society through their work?

Racism/Cultural Exclusion in Dance

21. In what ways have you experienced racism or cultural exclusion as a dancer?

The Status of Black Dance Today

22. How would you define the status of African American dancers/choreographers today?

Retaining Cultural Traditions

23. How does dance retain cultural traditions?

What is Black Dance?

24. Critics, scholars and choreographers seem to have difficulty defining "Black dance."

    a. Do you believe that "Black Dance" is an exclusive genre?

    b. Or is it dance by African Americans?

    c. Or is it African American dance?

Bridging the Gap

25. Does dance establish a form of community without regard to racial or cultural differences?

26. Do you think that dance can bridge the gap between cultural differences?

Dance Education

27. What components do you feel should be included in a dance program?

African American Contributions

28. What are some of the major contributions by African American choreographers to American concert dance that you feel should be noted?

29. Who do you feel has been the most influential choreographer in American dance?

30. What legacy or contribution would you like to leave (or have you made) to dance?